

# **Public Sphere, Politics and The Internet in Mainland China**

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## **Abstract**

Every communication medium – from pamphlets, newspapers, radio to television – has two-sided influences in politics. On the one side, they can buttress authoritarian governments. On the other side, their potential in democracy promotion is also magnificent and undeniable. Especially in digital age, the improvement in freedom of expression has been more and more associated with the impact of the Internet, new media and mobile phone communication. For China, while its economic development and military power are rapidly enhancing, the possibilities of improvement in participatory politics and democracy turn into a big question. With the quick rise in information and communication technologies (ICTs), the realization of “cyber democracy” and the growth of public sphere have become a wishful thinking for the Chinese people.

This thesis, by choosing the role of public sphere as a main theme, will mainly discuss the changing interactions between the government of People's Republic of China (mainland China) and citizens' freedom of expression. On the basis of comparison with the Western and other two East Asian countries (Japan and South Korea), the purpose of this thesis is to see how mainland China's public sphere has been transformed together with the changes in politics, economy and technology; and to find the uniqueness of China's public sphere and Internet-based political activism.

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## **Preface**

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## Introduction:

Every new communication medium has brought political changes. Although pamphlets, newspapers, radio, and television all can buttress authoritarian governments on the one side, their potential in democracy promotion is significant and undeniable on the other side. Now in digital age, the huge influence of the Internet, new media and mobile phone on freedom of expression has been highly concerned all around the world. Along with China's 1978 economic reform (改革开放, *gaige kaifang*), 1991 access to World Trade Organization (WTO) as well as the 1994 connection to the global Internet bandwagon, China is gradually opening its door and becoming an outstanding component in worlds' globalization and digitalization. While its economic development and military power are rapidly enhancing, the possibilities of China's improvement in participatory politics and democracy become a big question. Particularly, with the astonishing impact of advanced information and communication technologies (ICTs), the realization of democratization and rise in public sphere have turned into a more wishful thinking for the Chinese citizens. This thesis, looking at such “cyber democracy” challenges, will attempt to describe how the public sphere has been transformed together with China's transformation in politics, economy and technology. To what extent can the transformations of Chinese and the Western public spheres be comparable with each other? To what extent has China's political context made the public sphere distinct from other counterparts? To what degree have the advances in communication technologies served to China's democratization?

Before answering these questions, I will briefly sketch the earlier history about Britain's “liberty of the press” as well as the general development of public sphere in modern Western states. The British history about “liberty of press” recorded a long fight from the British people for a press freedom. It initially interested me to look at similar matters within the landscape of China's freedom of communication and expression. Then, the general development of public sphere in modern Western states inspired me to study the specific problems concerning China's public sphere, which finally became the theme of this thesis.

The British people waged the longest fight for “liberty of the press” since the English Revolution from 1640. To start with, Milton wrote the *Areopagitica: A speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing to the parliament of England* (1644). Then it came to the end of the *Regulation of Printing Act* in 1694; and the crash of the licensing system inherited by William and Mary (1689-1694). The act of “deregulation” resulted in Britain's first daily newspaper, the *Daily Courant* (1702). During

1720s and 1760s, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon published *Cato's Letters* (or *Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious and other important subjects*, 1720-1723), condemning tyranny and advancing principles of freedom of speech. Finally, in the 1830s, resistance against state censorships (which were in the forms of regulation, price and taxes on knowledge) reached the zenith. As a result, unstamped newspapers (such as *Destructive* and *the Poor Man's Guardian*) were smuggled from print shops to whole country (Keane, 1991: 8-10). In general, it was a long struggle for the British people to free their press and speech. It was also a process full of conflicts and intellectual pursuit.

Meanwhile, there came the rise and transformation of modern state in Europe during the 17<sup>th</sup>--18<sup>th</sup> century. On the basis of capitalist economic activities, a new sociability gradually emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The public was constituted as a specific realm again (as had the Greek polis) (Calhoun, 1992: 7). Accordingly, new "public knowledge" was generated on the basis of long-distance trade and development of publishing industry. New institutions, such as the press, publishing houses and literary societies led to a new infrastructure of social information (Boyte, 1992: 342). Together with the rational-critical discourse that grew in salons and coffee houses, the bourgeois public sphere eventually appeared and expanded. Consequently, civil society strengthened and gradually started to play the role of "the genuine domain of private autonomy that stood opposed to the state" (Calhoun, 1992: 7). In this sense, it was the transformation of economy that stirred the transformation of public sphere and civil society. Though, it was NOT the most radical discourse (like that of levelers during the British revolution) but the "mainstream" bourgeois ones got respected at that time, people still became enlightened in terms of rational-critical discourse and freedom of press.

Afterwards, this "classical" laissez-faire liberal capitalism was replaced by post-liberal capitalism, which was introduced in a state-interventionist form from the late decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Postone (1992: 175) argues that this historical phase started around 1873. Since a severe international economic depression took place in both Europe and the United States, the Western states' governing strategies began to pay more attention to transformation in social, economic, political and cultural dimensions. Meanwhile, huge industrial interests controlled a monopolized economy and destroyed the authority of the commercial middle classes (Boyte, 1992: 343). Because the public had become "passive mass of individualized consumers" (Boyte, 1992: 343), none of the proliferation of products could reach the whole of the public any more (Calhoun, 1992: 25). So, a split occurred in the publics between the minority of specialists (e.g., lawyers, academics) and the great mass of consumers. The former were entitled to keeping up with high-grade abstraction in art,



literature and philosophy (which was considered good from the viewpoint of modernity); while the latter were expected to accept the conclusions reached by the former, uncritically. As a result, the passive culture consumption and apolitical sociability dramatically broke the critical activity of the public discourse. The world fashioned by mass media, has become a public sphere in appearance only (Habermas, 1989: 171).

Then, Postone (1992: 175) dates the end of this state-centric capitalism by 1973. Under the influence of *the 1973 Oil Crisis* and the following economic recession, the advanced capitalist countries faced new challenges in state governance. With greater competition from the newly industrializing countries and regions, such as Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan, the major industrial countries met with a process of state decentralization as well as a shift of accumulation towards the Third World (Currie, 1980). Meanwhile, the institutions which were once at the heart of state-interventionist mode in the West – such as national state bureaucracies and industrial labor unions – became weaker. Two new dimensions gradually came up instead: a new plurality of social organizations and movements; and a process of globalization and capital concentration (Postone, 1992: 175-176). Moreover, electronic mass media changed people's social self-perception. So to say, on the one side, by producing “omnipresence of events and synchronization of heterochronologies”, the “televisionalized” and “digitalized” mass media is removing social barriers. People observe “a pluralization of life forms” and “an individualization of life plans” (Habermas, 1992: 456). On the other side, along with the removed barriers, there is a “multiplication of specified roles”, which actually leads to the “construction of personal communal allegiances and roots” (Habermas, 1992: 456). Hence, these two points tell that the electronic mass media is actually having contradictory impacts on people's communication activities. When the public sphere's infrastructure is getting increasing selective constrains from the electronic mass communication, the public sphere's ambivalent nature in democratic potential gets challenged (Habermas, 1992: 456-457).

Given all that, it seems like the history of the public sphere in the West has always been tightly connected with the development of capitalist economy and the implementation of state policy. Nowadays, after public sphere's *emerging, ascending and transforming* periods, its whole picture has become quite complex, especially under the influence of electronic mass communications. In a way, the clear distinction between public good and private interest, which forms classic basis for public sphere, is disappearing. In this sense, while the state gets benefits from this reorganized relation, the democratic politics may face a risk of breakdown (Eley, 1992: 294).

All in all, on the basis of Britain's struggles for “liberty of the press” and the analyses about the public sphere's development in modern Western states, this study about China's public sphere and politics has been endowed with both inspirations and theoretical background. By choosing the role of public sphere as a main theme, this thesis will mainly discuss the changing interactions between the government of People's Republic of China and citizens' freedom of expression. More specifically, it will focus on the cases in mainland China, leaving Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau out. The following content will answer questions like: along with economic and political changes from the late imperial time to Post-Mao era, how China's public sphere transformed accordingly. How did the 1978 economic reform and technological improvements (e.g. the Internet, microblog, and mobile phone) affect China's democratization? What are differences between China and other East Asian countries (Japan and South Korea) in terms of ICTs' impact on politics? With these questions, arguments of this thesis are explored in four core chapters. Chapter 1 looks at the relevant theoretical perspective in respect to public opinion and Habermas' public sphere. Chapter 2 examines public sphere's development from the late imperial time till Post-Mao era. Chapter 3 concentrates on China's political democratization under the impact of the Internet and new media. Furthermore, Chapter 4 debates on the Japanese and South Korean ICT-based democracy since 1990s. This cross-cultural comparison is expected to contextualize three countries' democratic politics, which then makes the understanding of China more comprehensive. Finally, Chapter 5 will generalize the process of Chinese public sphere's development, and its similarities and uniqueness compared with the one in the West.

## Chapter One: Theoretical perspectives

### Part One: Theories about the public opinion

#### 1. Creator of the Concept of Public Opinion: Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)

A doctoral student called Kurt Braatz found that Machiavelli (1469-1527) was the first person using concept of “public opinion” in Italian (Bauer, 1920). But, since it was impossible for Braatz to locate this passage, the usage of this term did not get confirmed until Michael Raffel (1984)’s articles: “*Creator of the Concept of Public Opinion: Michel de Montaigne* (Noelle-Neumann, 1993: 66).” According to the articles, Montaigne, who used *l’opinion publique* twice in his collection “*Essays*” in 1588, showed the earliest attentiveness to the social nature of man and to the effect of publicity (Noelle-Neumann, 1993: 66-69). In his opinion, prevailing opinions are actually tied to a particular place and time. It is something observable as a social reality with only temporary validity. Rather than standards of truth and reason, there are actually examples and ideas of opinions and habits in daily life.

#### 2. Adam Smith (1723-1790)

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, capitalism and Scottish Enlightenment quickly progressed in Scotland. Not only did free trade and commercial activities bring benefits, but they also caused the growth in literacy rates and the establishment of Europe’s first public education system. During this process, two striking figures, Hume (1711-1776) and Adam Smith both paid high attention to the concept of “*sympathy*”. Particularly, Adam Smith touched upon the idea of “public opinion” in his “*Theory of Moral Sentiments*”. For him, sympathy is the basis of moral approbation. The kind of judgment we pass upon others depends upon whether we perceive agreement or disagreement of his passions with what our own would be in his situation. We approve when we perceive that these emotions are such as our own would accord with, and in the contrary case we disapprove. So to say, it is only through the capacity of overleaping the bounds of our own individuality that a moral judgment is possible (Smith, 1759: Pt.I, passim). Moreover, Smith thinks that man is a capitalist who makes bargains by nature. But, man also needs to create good image for living in a group or society. This kind of needs control man’s pursuit of self-interest to a certain degree. So, it becomes possible for a man to be a “third person” or a “impartial observer” with sympathy for somebody else in trouble. The impartial spectators, which are viewed as “personification of sympathy phenomena”, will be the representative of the welfare in society. In Smith's (1776, Chapter 2) own words:

“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. Such self interest and economic self reliance were perfectly natural, grounded in the desire of bettering our condition, which comes with us from the womb and never leaves us till we go into the grave.”

For Adam Smith, social unity was naturally built on the intimate expression of individual life. So, social exchange and communication got combined under his interpretation. As Vernon L. Smith (1998: 31) argues:

“we are born social exchangers, much as we are born to learn naturally, without being taught...language becomes the communication basis of social exchange. Consequently, communication is supposed to be respected as a kind of property right that we need to enjoy in our life.”

### 3. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)

Different from Adam Smith, who ended up with touching upon the idea of “public opinion” in his concept of “*sympathy*”, Bentham became the first person who theorized and fully developed the theories of “public opinion”. As the father of utilitarian philosophy, he brought in the utilitarian perspectives to define “public opinion”. With liberal ideas, he concerns public opinion as “inherently progressive”. In his opinion, it would eventually coincide with his utilitarian ethical standard, the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Hence, Bentham does not focus on specifying the content of a “true” or “correct” public opinion. Instead, he demands an unfettered and inclusive public opinion in a representative democracy. For him, only through the newspapers-mediated channel, information can effect on equal citizenship; and the public opinion can keep an elected government in check (Cutler, 1999). Therefore, the public opinion should be formed on the basis of the press freedom. The investigation and publication of government actions are also necessary for public debates.

### 4. Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936)

German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies was co-founder and first president of the *German Sociological Association* (or *German Society for Sociology: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie*, DGS – a non-profit organization of German sociologists, founded in Berlin on 3 January 1909) (Deflem, 2001; DGS official site, 2005). With the innovative theoretical approach and a wide range of empirical studies in social issues, Tönnies is often respected as a “founding-father of sociology” (Deflem, 2001). Especially, his conceptualization in “*Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft*” (“community

and society”) has a very groundbreaking meaning for studies in social democracy.

Specifically, the *Gemeinschaft* is characterized as family-like, “tight” social associations with common values. On the basis of these core values, individuals feel loyal to each other. So, external social control is mostly not necessary. In contrast, the *Gesellschaft* is featured as personal interest-based society, where people have similar self interests instead of shared values. So compared with the *Gemeinschaft*, people have a secondary relationship in the *Gesellschaft*. Then, when it comes to the generation of public opinion, Tönnies concerns, if the public opinion is functioning in right conditions – where it is practiced by well-educated but not self-interested persons – the opinion has possibilities to become social pressure. Then, public opinion is able to play the role as a guide for social betterment, which in the end brings in a truly international “*Gesellschaft*”.

Particularly for nowadays, this way of interpreting *Gemeinschaft* has an extraordinary meaning for social network sites (SNSes), such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. In these online communities, users get together because they have common information and knowledge. Through these Net-based connections, netizens get more channels to share similar interests and concerns. This new social relationship may make the individuals in online community feel loyal to each other. So, in a way, the SNSes have “family-like” attributes, which may better help the generation of online public opinion. In this sense, the democratic impact from online community and SNSes is worth observing and noticing.

#### 5. Gabriel de Tarde (1843-1904)

The French sociologist Gabriel de Tarde, who even proposed a theory of public sphere long before Habermas (Katz, 1998: 89), is another important figure.

In essay “*La Conversation (1898)*”, Tarde looks at the links among the elements of participatory democracy, which comprise a body politic or polity, government, parliament, voluntary associations, media, places of conversation, public opinion, and social action as well (Katz, 2006). But, unlike Habermas, Tarde is not explicitly concerned with the workings of a deliberative democracy. It means that, in the Habermasian public sphere, one has to divest oneself of status and power and come only with a commitment to the commonweal. So the reason, which people all potentially possess, is actually a prerequisite to conversation in Habermasian paradigm (Katz, 2006). In contrast, conversations in Tarde’s public sphere are not necessarily into politics. Although the conversations have politics as one of their potential functions, they are much more casual and

only incidentally associated with intentions of problem solving. So the reason, in Tarde's public sphere, is more presented as a product of conversation (Katz, 2006).

Moreover, for Tarde, the political conversations' function is to *percolate* opinion. It means, in public sphere, political conversations give chance for participants to get more considered opinions than the ones they had before. In this way, individual opinion gets refined before it is “considered” enough to generate national opinion on a particular subject (Katz, 2006). Then, by being published on the newspapers again, these considered opinions change into a basis for individual action. In this way, Tarde notes the newspapers' impact on setting public discussion topics and on facilitating nationwide public opinion (Clark, 1969; Zhang, 2008: 45). In order to form public opinion, the media should play as a link: giving topics for the public to discuss in the beginning; and then expanding “considered” public opinions into finalized norm of individual action in the end (Zhang, 2007, my translation from the Chinese: “公意”从讨论聚到最后“个人行为基准”过程中, 新闻传播的连结作用).

#### 6. John Dewey (1859-1952)

American philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey has great influence all around the world. Particularly, he has a close relationship with China. From 1919, under the invitation of Hu Shi (胡适, a Chinese philosopher and also a Dewey's disciple), Dewey came and stayed in China for two years. During this time, he traveled and addressed speeches about political and educational philosophy. So, Dewey indeed exerted a tremendous impact on China's *New Culture Movement* at that time (新文化运动, *Xin Wenhua Yundong*: a movement called for creating a new Chinese culture based on global and Western standards, especially in terms of democracy and science in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> Century) (Zhang, 2009 in Chinese).

When it comes to Dewey's theories in “public opinion”, in “*The Public and Its Problems (1927)*”, he generalizes the difficulties under the influence of special interests, powerful corporate capital, numbing and distracting entertainment as well as general selfishness. In his eyes, the real problem of democracy is distractions from technology and capitalism in modern states. So to speak, desirable technology is attracting people's attention from political affairs; while capitalism is bringing class division in human relations. Meanwhile, with respect to technology's impact, Dewey also confirms its power in activating public's political interest.

By and large, Dewey has a relatively optimistic view on the public's democratic potential. For him, the public's fundamental character derives from its social existence, which makes interdependence

become a very important feature. So, in order to track shared interests and to reach democracy, keeping connection between the publics becomes extremely significant. Communication, in this way, turns into a necessary preparation for public actions. As Dewey (1927: 147; 152) states:

“Since every individual is a member of many groups, specification cannot be fulfilled except when different groups interact flexibly and fully in connection with other groups....Interactions, transactions, occur *de facto* and the results of interdependence follow. But participation in activities and sharing in results are additive concerns. They demand *communication* as a prerequisite.”

Accordingly, in order to improve democracy, the government needs to build a communication system between citizenship and the press. The press then serves as a vital link between government and the masses. Further, in Dewey's idea, the press should be reformed with two roles: the epistemological one in defining “what will be taken as truth”; and the moral one in providing answers to erase contradiction between the individual and society. Under this system, public's fullest potential gets exploited through keeping in touch with the press. The democracy becomes possible since the government represents the interests of the public (Bybee, 1997).

#### 7. Walter Lippmann (1889-1974)

Walter Lippmann is one of the most influential American political journalists in the 20th century. His experience gives him professional and critical perspectives in viewing the relationship between news, public opinion and the government. Compared with Dewey, his opinions are less optimistic.

Firstly, in “*Liberty and the News (1920)*”, Lippmann asks the possibility to link the liberty and the true news. He argues that opinion can be deeply troubled by the press. Because the press primarily exists for its own purposes and agendas rather than for free flow of ideas, it can only incidentally promote the real interplay for truths and ideas. The popular news is then full of inadequateness and unreliability.

Afterwards, he points out in “*Public Opinion (1922)*” that, the accuracy of news and protection of sources both create basic hindrances for democracy. In his opinion, the nature of news is officially confirmed information in practice. These pieces of information become pictures inside of people's heads. In other words, it is actually the distorted information, rather than realities of life, inherent in human mind. In the end, without the necessary truth to accurately perceive the outside world, people can only treat a “pseudo-environment” for granted. Besides, he also originates the phrase

“the manufacture of consent” in this book. It gives inspiration to public intellectuals Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman to title their co-authored book as “*Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of the Mass Media (1988)*”. Concerning “the manufacture of consent”, Lippmann (1922) argues, “the old constants of thinking have become variables” in the modern means of communication. “The common interests” of the public are accordingly not obvious as before. So, most people are neither interested nor capable of doing enough data collection and analyses so as to perceive the real world. In this sense, a critical intellectual exercise given by the well-informed people are necessary in many cases. Hence, Lippmann suggests that, as long as the manufacture of consent is properly exerted in the public interest, it is likely to win consent, since it is essential for making of a cohesive society.

Furthermore, he published “*The Phantom Public (1927)*”, as a sequel of “*Public Opinion*”. In this book, he describes the public as a “phantom”, because it has become incapable to access enough information in the setting of policy-making. He (1927: 150) clarifies in this way:

“The fundamental difference which matters is that between insiders and outsiders... Only the insider can make decisions... because he is so placed that he can understand and can act. The outsider is necessarily ignorant, usually irrelevant and often meddlesome, because he is trying to navigate the ship from dry land.”

Finally, besides the idea of “the manufacture of consent”, Lippmann also gives “stereotype” a modern meaning in book “*public opinion*”. As a matter of fact, “stereotype” has previously been interpreted as the “collective sentiments” (by Durkheim) and “ethnocentrism” (by William Sumner in *Folkways* (1906)). However, Lippmann gives it a boarder implementation with sociological, psychological and cognitive three perspectives. The impact of “stereotype” in his words is:

“For the most part we do not first see, and then define; we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture (Lippmann 1922).”

In this way, “stereotype”, which people are willing to adhere to, is actually a means of security. It is strongly associated with each specific culture. For instance, Edward Said's “*Orientalism*” is an outstanding example when it comes to the “Occidental” stereotypes towards the “Orient”. In Said's (2003) opinion, “the Orient” itself was a European invention to denote Asia as a place of exoticism, romance, also as a concept to contrast (commonly negatively) against Western civilization. So,



when the “Orientalism” represents a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (Said, 2003: 3), the “Orient”-related news and reports in the Western media can not be immune to “double standard”. Since the Western journalists are first of all involved as a human subject in his own circumstances, they actually “define first and then see”. In other words, they may have come up against the Orient as a European or American before making the judgments (Said, 2003: 11). On this point, the broadcasts of Tibet-related affairs are somehow already stereotyped. Westerners view Tibet as a highly spiritual civilization through a sort of “positive Orientalist” prism. Consequently, the Chinese state control over this area is a prior taken as political oppression. As Wang Hui (汪晖, a Chinese intellectual, professor in the Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Tsinghua University) explains: “due to lack of accurate understanding about China's history and tradition, the Westerners have difficulties to understand the Chinese system of regional autonomy for minority nationalities” (my translation from the Chinese: “由于缺少对中国的历史关系和传统的具体深入的理解, (西藏)民族区域自治这种不同于多元民族国家模型的独特制度, 很难得到他们(the Westerners) 的理解”) (Wu You Zhi Xiang, Utopia, 2008, in Chinese).

#### 8. Herbert Blumer (1900-1987)

Deriving from George Herbert Mead’s (an American philosopher and socialist, respected as one of the most significant figures in social psychology) principle on individual as an acting entity, American sociologist Blumer (the former President of *the American Sociological Association*) debates the interaction between humans in the natural world. By looking at the level of human conducts, Blumer and his “symbolic interactionism” give public opinion a micro-level framework. Generally speaking, this “*symbolic interactionism*” discipline has three basic premises:

- (1). “Humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things.”
- (2). “The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others and the society.”
- (3). “These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters (Blumer, 1969: 2).”

In general, the central idea of this discipline tells that, people act as they do because of how they define situations. Rather than directly reacting to other's conducts, human interaction is actually mediated by symbolic interpretation towards the meaning of one another's actions (Blumer, 1962). Accordingly, in the communication field, conversations are interaction of symbols between individuals. People talk according to their constant interpretation about the outside world. So,

instead of an interaction of disparate individuals who share equally in the process, the public opinion is actually generated through organization of society. In other words, the public opinion occurs only in large measure through the interaction of groups (Blumer, 1969: 199-200).

## **Part Two: Jürgen Habermas (1929- ) and the “public sphere” paradigm**

Besides these earlier mentioned intellectuals contributing ideas for “public opinion”, German philosopher Jürgen Habermas’ “public sphere” paradigm needs to be explained as well. In his studies, not only does he conceptualize “public sphere”, but he also puts his lifelong efforts on “inter-subjective communicative processes” (Calhoun, 1992: 5).

To begin with, Habermas was a student of Horkheimer and Adorno, belonging to Frankfurt School. This is a group of researchers especially associated with the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt am Main. Generally speaking, they apply Marxism and Hegelian philosophy to analyze the social relations and problems in the capitalist economic systems. By implementing “critical theory”, they present influential critiques against the large corporations, technologies, industrialization of culture as well as authoritarianism. One of their well-known criticisms is Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s opinion against mass-produced culture industries. In their works, such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) and *Negative Dialectics* (1966), they argue that all the many forms of popular culture are a single *culture industry*. The political implication of this culture industry is to ensure the continued obedience of the masses to market interests. Under control of this mass culture, something is provided for all so that none may escape. Namely, other than a hierarchical range of mass-produced products of varying quality, there is nothing left for the consumer to classify (Marxists.org, 2005).

Meanwhile, Habermas does not completely follow his teachers’ criticism. On the one side, he looks at changes that have happened in the periods of Western modernity, from a liberal capitalism to an “organized” one. In this sense, his work parallels of the previous Frankfurt School’s analysis about capitalism transition (Calhoun, 1992: 6). On the other side, his best-known “*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (“*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*”, 1962)” differs from the predecessors’ works. In fact, this book is viewed as Habermas’ critical response to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Hohendahl, 1992: 99).

In “*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*”, Habermas conceptualized the idea of “public sphere”. With a focus on “bourgeois public sphere”, Habermas underlines the significance of political

participation and the function of public sphere in promoting democracy. In his opinion, the “deregulation” and abolishment of licensing system in Britain marked a stage for the development of public sphere in the end of 17<sup>th</sup> century. Pamphlets, salons and coffee shops all created good environment for the expansion of literary public sphere (文学公共领域, *wenxue gonggong lingyu*), from which the political public sphere (政治公共领域, *zhengzhi gonggong lingyu*) was derived as a result (哈贝马斯 Habermas, 1999a: 34~35, in Chinese). In his eyes, Daniel Defoe (1660~1731)'s *Review*, Sir Richard Steele (1672~1729) and Joseph Addison (1672~1719)'s *Tatler* and *The Spectator* all promoted the public sphere with clearly critical features. As Habermas (1989: 43) writes: “In the *Tatler*, the *Spectator*, and the *Guardian* the public held up a mirror to itself...The public that read and debated this sort of thing read and debated about itself.” It means that the readers began to read and debate *as a public*. Gradually, this group of educated elite “came to think of itself as constituting the public and thereby transformed the abstract notion of the *publicum* as counterpart to public authority into a much more concrete set of practices (Calhoun, 1992: 9).” As a result, the bourgeois public sphere got institutionalized through concerning themselves “not just as the object of state actions but as the opponent of public authority (Calhoun, 1992: 9).” Moreover, a practice of rational-critical discourse on political matters was also necessary for the institutionalized public sphere. In all, Habermas (1989, 27) describes the bourgeois public sphere as:

“The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people’s public use of their reason.”

Nonetheless, when the public sphere becomes dominated by mass media in the 20th century, it suffers a process of “refeudalization” (“再封建化”, *zai fengjianhua*) (哈贝马斯 Habermas, 1999a: 170-171, in Chinese). It means that, the “journalism of private men of letters” changes into public services. The public sphere starts serving to private powers (Habermas, 1962, 1989: 188-189), who in turn take the role as opinion leaders for other groups (Habermas, 1962, 1989: 213). In the end, common people engaged in discussion mostly have a tendency to do no more than mutually confirm the existing ideas. Majority of people contribute little to a process of *public* opinion, because the best they can do is to only influence the hesitant and less involved parties (Habermas, 1962, 1989: 213).

In fact, since the English version of “*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*” came in 1989, there have been various comments about Habermas' criticisms against mass media. Particularly, under the inspirations of Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis, Verstraeten (1996) claims a new understanding of “media determinism”. In his opinion, media determinism, as a subset of technological determinism, has really huge impact on society. The rise of telecommunication has possibility to surpass the time-space limitations, which can entail a radical structural change in the social situations. Consequently, the public sphere is no longer the one Habermas used to depict. Now, it is based on both the “off-stage” and the “on-stage” behaviors. Hence, technologies may not be a determined factor for the public sphere; but it is very influential in this sense.

As a matter of fact, ever since the political changes in East Europe, Habermas himself has more noticed the importance of television. For him, in a way, social transformations in East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Romania were not merely broadcasted on TV. Rather, the “very *mode of occurrence*” for this transforming process was actually realized in such a televisional way of communication (Habermas, 1992: 456; 哈贝马斯 Habermas, 1999a: xxxii~xxxiii, in Chinese)

All in all, there have been diverse interpretations of “public opinion” and “public sphere” by Western intellectuals. In their discourse, public opinion and public sphere are seemingly always tightly connected with the development of capitalism and technologies. In order to expand the public sphere and generate the “considered” public opinion, a democratic government, an open and informative media as well as the practice of rational-critical discourse on political issues are all essential elements.

For the case in China, although the economic, cultural and political transformations undergo differently from the Western process, the improvement in economy and technologies have huge impact on China's political relationships as well. The interplay between the government, the media and the public has been changing accordingly all the way along. The following content will try to examine how China's public opinion and public sphere developed and changed. Arguments begin with the development of public sphere from the late imperial China to Post-Mao era.

## Chapter Two: Development of public sphere from the late imperial time to Post-Mao era in China

### Part One: The public sphere in the late imperial China

There are many reasons to explain why the Western countries opened China and made it into a semi-colonial country for over 100 years. One of the arguments refers to the existence of “public sphere” from the end of 17<sup>th</sup> century in Europe. According to Hutton (2008: 51), this public sphere (described by Habermas) assured a mediated relationship between the Western government and its citizens. It made the government into a “discrete part of the same public sphere rather than opposed to it”. So to speak, due to these non-state but public institutions in public affairs, the government and the individuals obtained arbitrators in between. Then, the plurality of interests got protected and reinforced in the public sphere. This new social situations together with other economic advantages brought in the European Enlightenment, which eventually helped Europe succeed. Accordingly, it implies that the absence of public sphere restricted China’s development at that time. So, is it true that the late imperial China had no public sphere or non-governmental organizations working as mediators between the rulers and the ruled? How was the relationship between the state and the citizens during that time?

In fact, ever since the ancient period, Chinese political culture developed many ideas concerning how emperors should rule his people with effective communications. For example, among the three sovereigns and five emperors (三皇五帝, *sanhuang wudi*), Shun (舜) became the first one to strengthen connections between government and effective speech. In order to “see with the eyes and hear with the ears of all”, his first stated policy is to “open the doors of communication between the court and the empire” (Oliver, 1971: 102-103). Besides, the King Wu of Chou (周武王, *Zhou Wuwang*) also stated: “Heaven sees through the eyes of my people and Heaven listens through the ears of my people” (天视自我民视, 天听自我民听。《尚书·泰誓中》). Lastly, according to Noelle-Neumann (1993: Introduction to the Second American Edition), as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese characters “public” and “opinion” was firstly used together in texts . It refers to “舆论” (“舆”: *yú*, “public”; “论”: *lùn*, “opinion” or “discussion”) from “三国志·魏书·王朗传” (*Sanguozhi, Weishu, Wanglangzhuan*)) (*Zhonghua xinwenbao*, 中华新闻报, 2007, in Chinese).<sup>(1)</sup>

However, rather than dividing into various nation-states as the Europe went through, China gradually developed into a single monopolistic polity since the late 6<sup>th</sup> century (Johnson, Nathan

and Rawski, 1985: Preface xi). Then, the Chinese culture obtained two different features at the same time: diversity and integration. On the one hand, because of the diversity, there were multiple hierarchies on power, prestige, education, dialect and occupation from elite to non-elite. On the other hand, due to the integration, these multifarious elements were somehow combined under a highly centralized control. Accordingly, ever since China's public sphere emerged in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century (Rankin, 1990), it has performed in a different way under such a specific socio-political setting.

### 1. The growth of China's public sphere in the late imperial China

From the mid- or late 18<sup>th</sup> century, improvement of economy gradually led to a dynamic growth of societal diversity in China. Commercial activities largely accelerated the growth of elite-run associations and non-governmental groups. Especially in the Lower and Middle Yangzi regions, there were many local public spheres. Further, due to the downturn of the Qing dynasty during the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the local public spheres gained even more autonomy (Rankin, 1993: 162).

In detail, there are many beneficial factors for the generation and promotion of China's public sphere, such as the conditions of economy and education, the expansion of printing technology and publishing business. Firstly, when it comes to the impact of economy, the monetization of silver brought a “shift to water” to China's southern coastal area. The agricultural commercialization and handicraft production made big changes in social structure. Meanwhile, due to a relaxation of direct governmental control, a more flexible social status system was created. It somehow increased the social stratification and insecurity. As a result, competition for examination degrees became more important, especially for the elite households. In this way, a new urban culture was not only ignited, but also got opportunities to spread to the rural districts. In general, during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, peace and prosperity were able to be seen on many regions. The rise in market economy made the society restless, fragmented but also fiercely competitive (Rawski, 1985). Secondly, there was growing access to education in many regions. Community schools, working as charitable elementary schools, were established under both the local initiative and imperial support. The civil service examinations did not just give people chances to work for public affairs, but also stimulated creativity in urban culture. A marked symbol was the increase in *wen ren* (文人, man of culture), who “devoted themselves to literature and art” rather than an orthodox career in political bureaucracy. Many of their works were classified as *shan shu* (善书, morality books) in Chinese. By highlighting moral actions, these books made individuals more concerned about personal fates and conducts (Rawski, 1985). Furthermore, under the impact of education, ideology of “merit making

(功德, *gong de*)” increased. The elite shifted to consider official occupations as a kind of noble activity. Particularly, the ones aiming at public life could work more as a mediator in the local district. To a certain degree, there was a synergistic relationship between the government, elite and non-elite. On certain circumstances, these elite associations were able to effect bureaucratic decisions (Rankin, 1993: 168). Clearly, the increase of education helped social mobility; and enhanced the population with moral and ethical values. Consequently, the public sphere received supportive literacy and rationality. Lastly, the large-scale printing technology and publishing business were also crucial factors. The woodblock printing or xylography was simple and cheap. Compared with the European printing, the Chinese one was more favorable in terms of training, capital investment as well as raw materials (particularly paper). In short, once the character tablets are made, they can be preserved and used for making changes in the text as often as one wishes (Gallagher, 1953, cited from Rawski, 1985: 17). Moreover, a much bigger market and a uniform written language helped the spread of publications as well. As a result, China's printing business got decentralized in the late imperial time. Governmental authorities, private individuals, associations, institutions or commercial firms, all could publish books. More interestingly, rather than the administrating agencies, it was the non-official institutions and commercial firms disseminating more publications. In a word, thanks to the printing technology, paper manufacturing and a big market, a vivid publication industry got opportunities to grow up in late imperial China.

All in all, for the promotion of public sphere, the impact of economy, education and publication were all decisive. The educated elite mobilized themselves through formal associations and public activities. Through individual conducts in merchant networks, schools, printing industry or tea-house, elite created more chances for people's public discussion (公议, *gong yi*) (Rankin, 1993: 167). As Yang (1989: 35-36) argues:

“A distinct pre-modern civil society existed in the form of corporate groups and voluntary associations: guilds, native place associations, clan and lineages, surname association, neighborhood associations, and religious groupings such as temple societies, deity cults, monasteries, and secret societies. Perhaps the most important shared principle of these organizations was that they were formed outside of, or independent of, the state.”

## 2. Huang Zongxi (黄宗羲, 1610-1695) and his *Waiting for the Dawn: A plan for the prince* <sup>(2)</sup> (明夷待访录, *Mingyidaifanglu*)

Huang Zongxi is one of the “three late Ming and early Qing Confucians” (明末清初三大儒, *qingmo mingchu sandaru*), together with Gu Yanwu (顾炎武) and Wang Fuzhi (王夫之). His thought-

provoking *Mingyidaifanglu* (1663) has close discourses to the modern idea of public opinion. Hence, this book is always compared with Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1762), which has similar theme but is accomplished almost one century later.

*Mingyidaifanglu* is a book embedded with democratic ideas and enlightening thoughts. For Huang, agency of scholars and schools play a very important role in monitoring the conducts of the rulers. Specifically, in chapters 原君 (*yuán jūn*: to trace the origin of the emperor), 原臣 (*yuán chén*: to explore the role and obligations of bureaucratic officials) and 原法 (*yuán fǎ*: to trace the origin of public regulations and policies), Huang gives his key thesis as: the master of the country should be common people rather than the emperor. So, for him, the existence of emperor is the biggest hindrance for common people's individual interests (然则为天下之大害者, 君而已矣: p. 4). The obligation to the bureaucratic officials is to serve the whole population rather than the emperor and the imperial family only (故我之出而仕也, 为天下, 非为君也; 为万民, 非为一姓也: p. 10). Then, in order to have these qualified officials, reasonable regulations and laws become a very fundamental prerequisite (故曰有治法而后有治人: p. 23). Besides, he advocates school's role as informed tribunals for public discussion and for policy-making. So to say, school is essential for bringing up intellectuals. But, the origin of school established by former emperors was not only limited in this educational functions. Schools should become a central venue for generating governmental policies and national institutions (学校, 所以养士也。然古之圣王, 其意不仅此也; 必使治天下之具皆出于学校, 而后设学校之意始备: p.35). Lastly, when it comes to the education issues of the emperor's sons, Huang suggests that, when they are 15 years old, they should study together with other officials' sons in the Imperial Academy (太学, *tài xué*). In this way, they can personally contact the civil affairs and suffer a certain degree of hardship (天子之子年至十五, 则与大臣之子就学于太学, 使知民之情伪 p. 45) (my translation from the Chinese).

On all accounts, although Huang shows his bias towards some “useless” works, such as eight-part essays (八股文, *bā gǔ wén*), novels (小说, *xiǎo shuō*) and poems (词曲, *cí qǔ*) in this book (p. 50-51), he also offers great foresights for democratic politics. Not only does it question the long-lastingly monarchy; but it also demands ordinary people's power in public affairs. To a certain degree, his discourse indicates the late imperial intellectuals' deep thoughts about the public's huge impact in promoting democracy.

### 3. Differences between the late imperial and Habermas' public sphere

As earlier mentioned, one of the social features in late imperial China refers to a high degree of



integration. The supreme emperor ruled a highly centralized regime. So, for China's public sphere, it was growing, but at a relatively slow pace. In reality, it was a product of “state presence” and “a degree of autonomous or voluntary social involvement”. It was neither from direct state administration (or coercive control) nor from private spheres of family or apolitical friendship networks (Rankin, 1993: 160). In other words, the lack of political freedom made the late imperial public sphere different from European counterparts. Many problems had inhibited its expansion.

First of all, the education was encouraged, but it was implemented on the basis of a unified curriculum and a standardized written language. It ensured the continuance of a single empire over enormous territory, regardless of the geographical distance or diversity in spoken languages. Due to an intense scrutiny on school curriculum and textbooks, Rawski (1985: 31) argues that “the connection between public order and inculcation of values (as opposed to simple coercion) was perhaps more explicit in China than in many other pre-modern cultures.”

Secondly, the changes in social relationship did not necessarily mean people's acceptance of new social-political ideology. Instead, the Confucian values still played a dominant role in guiding people's behaviors (Rawski, 1985: 29-32). Following the basic ethics in *ren* (仁, human-heartedness), *yi* (义, righteousness), *li* (礼, rites), *zhi* (智, moral knowledge) and *xin* (信, good faith), to glorify one's own familial status was much more important than to devote oneself in public affairs.

Thirdly, China's elite differed from the bourgeoisie. In spite of the relaxation of governmental control, the link between elite and state was still stronger than in Europe (Rankin, 1993). Besides, rather than being an outcome of capitalist commercial development, the hybrid gentry-merchant elite in China were a product of civil examination and selection system. So to say, they served the emperor rather than the public. On many occasions, it was the local government together with local elite taking on the public actions. Hence, rather than a nationwide autonomy, the elite actually had a mutual dependence with the local government. Accordingly, in China's public sphere, discussions were mostly carried between various members from different classes, but not between the state and the publics (Mitussis, 2006: 2). In this sense, the late imperial public sphere was far away from the non-elite. Although elite-sponsored education gave more access for common people, the participation in more institutional public sphere (such as the academies and literary societies) was actually very limited to the non-elite (Feuchtwang, 1993; and Sangren, 1987).

In this sense, Huang (1993) prefers using “the third realm” (between the state and the society) to describe such gentry-topped public sphere in late imperial China. For Huang (1993: 228), the socio-political system was presented as “a stack of three blocks of different sizes”. Specifically, the small one at the top was formal state apparatus; and the large one at the bottom was society. While, the medium-sized third block mediated in between. It included sub-county administrative posts (such as 乡保, *xiangbao* or 排长, *paizhang* in the village) (Huang, 1993: 227), officials and gentry leaders in public service projects.

In conclusion, China's public sphere was formed in a different way from Habermas' discourse. Its origin was connected with the rise of commercial activities and a hybrid of gentry-merchant elite. But, the British public sphere was derived from the growth of capitalism and bourgeoisie. Moreover, different from the British public sphere's role in promoting public rational discussions, the Chinese one was more concerned with its management as state's supplementary organ on the local level. To a large extent, it was highly localized rather than having a nationwide autonomy. Essentially, it just “worked to fill the gaps left by a minimalist state and because of the same reason the state was unlikely to meet such groups head-on (Mitussis, 2006: 2).” To a certain degree, the late imperial public sphere as a vehicle for communication challenged the relationship between the privileged minority and the masses. But, it could not be compared with the European counterparts in terms of political freedom and independence (Rankin, 1993). In fact, the elite had never truly turned themselves against the imperial authority until the foreign invasions in the late Qing era (Mitussis, 2006: 2). Next part will look at public sphere's role in the late Qing and Republican time.

## **Part Two: The public sphere in the late Qing Dynasty and the Republican China**

There were full of disasters in China's late Qing and Republican periods. Continuous imperialist aggressions, establishment of unfair treaties, widespread opium abuse as well as successive warlordism all made the improvement of public sphere unrealistic. On the other hand, due to the diminishing imperial authority and decreasing political control, it became more possible for citizens to participate in public disputes and decision-making. Consequently, the development of Chinese public sphere presented in quite divided scenarios at this time.

### **1. The growth of public sphere in the late Qing and the Republican China**

Since Qing government was defeated in the 1840 *Sino-British Opium War*, the emperor's regime was fundamentally shaken. Especially, after the *Taiping Rebellion* (太平天国起义, *taiping tianguo qiyi*, 1850-1864), the lessening of governmental control was seemingly quite favorable to the public

sphere. The Qing state was lenient to the elite and the extra-bureaucratic associations as well (Rankin, 1993: 174). For instance, in the field of land reclamation and water control, the governmental even started to build regular offices for “ad hoc third-realm public activities (Huang, 1993: 229). Additionally, the *New Policy* (Late Qing Reform, 1901-1911), which was initiated to increase the state authority and retrieve the ruling power, indeed reduced the state interventions on local levels (Rankin, 1993: 173). During these 10 years, civil service examinations were abolished in 1905; and a national education system was created instead (Kaske, 2008: 235). Modern activities, such as building schools, courts and transports, were officially established in the form of statemaking (Huang, 1993: 229). As a result, public sphere got foundations to further develop.

Then, after the *1911 Xinhai Revolution* (辛亥革命), Chinese auto-organizational practices entered a new phase. With the growth of cities as political centers, the urban politics became more dominant power than the state (Brook, 1997: 31). Thus, mass mobilizations were increasing clearly. The universities received more freedom through street demonstrations (Hayhoe & Zhong, 1997: 122). Especially, the merchant associations changed from the relief organizations or dispute-mediating channels into independent groups (Huang, 1993: 228). To gain industrial monopoly was very likely.

In addition, the public sphere got even more freedom in the foreigner-controlled treaty ports. In Hankou (汉口, a treaty port opened after the Second Opium War), for instance, urban administration below the centrally appointed bureaucrats was in the hands of gentry elite. There was little or even no state interference. With a trend of social and economic pluralism, the post-Taiping Hankou became a “preindustrial urban, commercial capitalist city”, which was very similar to the Western conception of a “city” (Rowe, 1984: 121). Besides, due to non-stop turbulence in the Republican-ruled regions, mass migration flooded in the industrialized treaty ports. Ironically, it caused the expansion of an independent press, a leisure society as well as a trades union. The newspapers reflected viewpoints of protectors or the Western interests (Harrison, 2003); and the literature helped to form bourgeois identity and subjectivity (Lee, 2001: 296-297). Further, different kinds of leisure activities also occurred in the Western-style tea house and sporting clubs (Bergère, 1997; Strand, 1989). In a word, a leisure class (with the time and resources to participate in public sphere) was created in the treaty ports, particularly in Shanghai. In the eyes of Mitussis (2006: 3), this was somehow alike the bourgeois society which is depicted by Habermas.

In general, there were all types of associations trying to influence state politics in their favor in the Republican China. More importantly, most of these public associations aimed more at saving the

country rather than capturing the state power. For instance, in *the 1919 May Fourth Movement*, the student-centered demonstrations protested against the government's failure in *the Paris Peace Conference* with signing *The Treaty of Versailles*. This series of nationwide demonstrations was actually with a high level of political mobilization as well as a burst of Chinese nationalism. To a large extent, this kind of long-lasting social practices in neighborhood and occupational groups brought a rich associational life. It made the urban political participations more realistic (Brook & Frolic, 1997: 30-31). So, Huang (1993) notices this change as a new trend of societal integration, under which “the third realm” became more institutionalized. No matter the semi-official public works “bureaus” (局, *ju*) or the self-government bureaus, both offered wider possibility for public activities (Huang, 1993: 230). Under this new civic politics in the Republican period (Brook, 1997: 31), public spheres and public activities largely expanded and reached an unprecedented degree. Particularly in the treaty ports, such as Hankou and Shanghai, the public sphere was very close to Habermas' description.

## 2. Skepticism towards the public sphere in the late Qing and the Republican China

Although the public sphere came to a climax during the late Qing and Republican China, there are many contestations about its virtual role and impact. Some deficiencies still make it incomparable with the British counterpart.

First of all, under the encouragement of *Qing New Policy*, elite were allowed to take over many public activities, ranging from managing commercial chambers, establishing educational associations to carrying out constitutional programs. Consequently, it became possible for them to use public activities for personal interests. Since the lines between “official” (官, *guan*), “public” (公, *gong*), and “private” (私, *si*) were less than distinct, individual manifestations of public sphere activity could drift off into private, self-interested engrossment—a kind of political tax-farming (Wakeman, 1993: 132; Strand, 1990: 4, 10). In this way, the local elite and the bureaucratic offices still maintained their mutual dependence. The elite got political protections; while the state officials could keep their own ruling status. Indeed, the *Qing New Policy* simply “formalized roles that had been customarily informal, making local managers an integral part of the state sector (Kuhn, 1991: 7).” So, in this sense, the Late Qing public sphere was actually politicized (Rankin, 1993: 173). Besides, the *Qing New Policy* also pushed the official revenue agents to finance merchant and gentry groups. It then led to a decline of private endowments in the local areas. Given this official sponsorship in the public activities, the degree of autonomy in elite-centered public sphere became also disputable (Wakeman, 1993: 130).

Secondly, for the Nanjing government, although political protests were accepted, its regulations confined the social associations at times. For instance, the government discarded elite from municipal government in Shanghai; and destroyed the elite-run local government in Jiangsu (Rankin, 1993: 174). Besides, Yuan Shikai's (袁世凯) alienation of Republican supporters and Jiang Jieshi's (蒋介石) *White Terror campaign* (白色恐怖, *baise kongbu*) both created tremendous obstacles to social activism.

Moreover, most of the Republican journalists were actually sticking to the Confucian-liberal journalism at that time. They simply played the role as Confucian-liberal enlightened teachers. So the citizens were treated as the target of education, guidance and enlightenment, rather than public citizens (Chin-Chuan Lee, 2005: 108-109). Not as John Dewey has asked for, the media failed to keep interdependency between different public groups before public actions; and it also failed to exploit the fullest potential from the public. As a result, this disconnection between media and the public created problems for public sphere's expansion and for public opinion's generation. The public sphere activities did not take place in a unified way; and the public opinion did not have virtual impact on decision-making. In reality, the native local associations sometimes disagreed with the student movements or the trade unions (Wasserstrom, 1998: 133). They even became hindrance for the political unification. So, public demonstrations at this time more easily changed into forcible riots rather than rational discussions and participations. Particularly, with the low level of state modernization (such as the respect for human rights and laws), it was easier for both the state and the common people to abuse violence (Mitussis, 2006: 3). To a certain degree, this lack of rationality problematized the Republican public sphere.

Lastly, according to Wakeman's (1993) research on Hankou, the likeness between the Chinese and Western public sphere was less than it appeared. In fact, Hankou was an entrepot with mixed inhabitation, including immigrants, sojourners as well as the local people. The unavoidable community conflicts challenged its image as a "highly institutionalized community" (Wakeman, 1993: 117). Although Rowe (1984: 10, 250; 1989: 27) termed "locational identity" to depict sojourner's new conception of identity, the high degree of cultural tolerance was still doubtful in Hankou. Hence, rather than being a "comparative social calm" city, Hankou sometimes was full of violence among different origins of people. Additionally, the extent of municipal autonomy in Hankou was uncertain either. In Wakeman's (1993) opinion, Hankou was a highly policed and administered city, which was in reality completely under the official thumb of the government. The

merchants were vulnerable, because the state officials not only controlled the merchant broker's selections, but also ruled over the provincial revenue and tax. In terms of the leisure activities, the newspapers' independence has also been questioned. Not only did the *Zhaowen Xinbao* (昭文新报: 中国人最早在中国境内创办的报刊, the first newspaper established by the Chinese in 1873) last less than one year, but the foreigner-run newspapers also failed (Wakeman, 1993: 128). It was almost impossible for the Hankou population to read papers on a routine basis (Rowe, 1989: 26). In sum, Hankou apparently differed from the Western “preindustrial urban, commercial capitalist city”, as Rowe (1984: 121) claimed. The evidence of public sphere was dubious, especially in the sense of a critical public opinion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Wakeman, 1993: 125).

To sum up, scenarios in the late Qing and Republican China were distinct and ambivalent. On the basis of a peasant economy and natural-village society, the state and societal power spontaneously overlapped and collaborated with each other. Except certain degree of societal integration and modern statemaking, there was not a full-blown transformation to modern urban industrial society (Huang, 1993: 231). Therefore, on the one side, democratic development benefited from the decentralized political control. It brought China an unprecedented degree of political activism. On the other side, with a lower level of political unification and rationality, China's public sphere remained different from its European counterparts (Rowe's, 1989: 346). In the end, neither a modernizing dictatorship nor a civil society grew strong enough to rule the country until the 1949 Chinese Communist Party's success.

### **Part Three: The public sphere in contemporary China**

#### **1. The Maoist/Communist era**

After 1949 defeat of the Kuomintang, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power in China by strictly implementing Mao's theories and strategies. Therefore, although China was no longer a “semi-colonial and semi-feudal country” (as the Communists used to call it before) from then on, and the Chinese people were now supposed to become masters of their own country, it did not mean that the Communist-controlled mass media were going to impartially serve the interests of all Chinese citizens. In fact, the press got no space to serve other social forces but the Party's propaganda purposes (Gan, 1994, cited from Li, 2003: 2). The media freedom was far from enough to take part in rational-critical arguments and political participatory activities. So, in the Habermasian sense, the media were not the underpinning of the public sphere but rather a representative of the “state publicity” (Li, 2003: 4).

Specifically, a highly centralized press system ensured the existence and functioning of the CCP's "Party journalism" during this time. The goal of such journalism was not to reflect public opinion, but to "use the Party's, or the highest leader's thoughts to unify the people's thoughts" (Sun, 1994: 20). This Maoist model reduced the role of journalists to a "Communist revolutionary cadre", who were in fact viewing the massive audience as the target of mobilization and indoctrination (Chin-Chuan Lee, 2005: 109). The social function of China's press, as the Party's mouthpiece, was to instruct the people on socialist ideology, to carry on political task, to propagate policies, to educate, to organize and to mobilize the masses (Lu, 1982, cited from Li, 2003). As a result, since the government had no intention to build a communication system between the citizenship and the press (as Dewey has pointed out), the existence of authentic public sphere and democracy was unthinkable. Even for the universities, although in the Republican period they had been patriotic and broadly sympathetic to the Communist Party, the universities' corporate identities were thoroughly restructured and made into the huge machine of socialist construction during this time (Hayhoe & Zhong, 1997: 122).

In fact, Mao (1967) noticed the influence of the bourgeois intellectuals. He did not simply try to confine their activities, but also used them to produce its own revolutionary intellectuals while reeducating the former to serve the Revolution (Tang, 2005: 167). The 1957-1958 *anti-rightist campaign* (反右派运动) showed exactly how Mao prevented the intellectuals from any "public sphere" outside of the Party's control. The people who got most suppressed in this rectification campaign were intellectuals, such as writers, professors and academic elite. Since they were all educated on the ideas of freedom and democracy, the foremost task of this campaign clearly was to destroy their political and ideological influence on the public. In this way, the intellectuals' leadership in the practice of rational-critical discussions got damaged. It then became impossible for the public to form "considered" public opinion, which could really affect the politics. As one article on "炎黄春秋 (Yanhuang Chunqiu, 2010, in Chinese)" reveals, the cleaning-up was actually for creating a centralized control of the public opinion, as well as for establishing a culture and thought dictatorship (my translation from the Chinese: 建立舆论一律体制, 形成思想专政、文化专政).

To be short, for the sake of maintaining the political homogeneity of the CCP-ruled country, in Mao's era, the mass media had to unconditionally conform to the Party's propaganda purposes. Because there were lack of well-informed intellectuals and the autonomous media as leaders in the public opinion market, the development of public sphere and public opinion was inapplicable to this historian context.

## 2. Post-Mao and Deng Xiaoping's reform period

### (1) Positive trends under the impact of reform

Before Deng Xiaoping's reform, China's media were different from the West. It has never become privately owned businesses, which could otherwise ensure it a management independency from the control of the state (Zhao, 1998). Then, with the idea of “whether the cat is black or white, it is a good cat if it catches mice (不管黑猫白猫, 抓到老鼠就是好猫)”, Deng chose a more pragmatic ideology in China. He initiated a new process of economic modernization and social reformation from 1970s, which led to several positive trends.

Firstly, although the bottom-line political requirement remained firmly in place, Deng did not ignore some new changes in terms of a more balanced and healthier relationship between Chinese intellectuals' freedom and state's demand for loyalty (Tang, 2005: 169). Since both the Party and non-Party intellectuals shared modern patriotic desire to see China growing stronger and more developed, they were actually the most pro-reform power supporting the establishment of market in China (Tang, 2005: 185). Deng realized this, and then the Party stated to adopt a new implicit contract with the intellectuals, seeking to elicit their support by allowing them a kind of qualified autonomy (Tang, 2005: 168). Therefore, for the Party, on the one side, it concentrated on how to keep power. On the other side, it admitted the intellectuals' contribution to China's social and economic modernization (Tang, 2005: 169). Meanwhile, for the intellectuals, one important feature of them was their sense of political responsibility and their desire for political participation. So, on the one side, they remained critical of the government to a certain degree (2005:185). On the other side, they were not supposed to challenge the Party's power, but neither were they required to be actively and independently engaged in China's politics (Tang, 2005: 169-179). As a result, China's major differentiation between intellectuals and political life was somehow institutionalized.

Besides, Deng's reform made the media landscape transformed. As the state financial subsidies were partly gone, the media had to generate their own revenues and enhance their reputation and circulation with a variety of methods by themselves. In a way, there was a higher degree of financial autonomy for the media than ever before. So, facing the increasingly commercialized market, the media which once did not care so much about market or readership, began to take commercial factors into account in their daily decision-making. In this sense, keen market competition has undoubtedly acted as a stimulus for shifting media content and coverage, which eventually came closer to the interests of the general public and the media professionals (Li, 2002). As a result, the media started to serve two masters at the same time: the Party-state as well as the public. Somehow,



it finally turned into a communication channel between the state and the ordinary citizens. Together with a certain degree of blunt government control at times, editorial freedom and independence gradually emerged. Moreover, thanks to the emergence of investigative journalism, the media began to act in a critical role with criticizing official's behavior, disclosing social problems, and promoting anti-corruption struggle and transparency in public affairs (Li, 2008: 50).

For instance, *Focus* (焦点访谈, *Jiaodian Fangtan*), a China Central Television (CCTV) investigative news show (which started on 1st April 1994), is a good example of the investigative journalism. Since this show publicly exposed the government wrongdoings, the *Focus* staff indeed acted as watchdogs on behalf of the common people (Wang and Bates, 2008). As Bentham argues that, the information can effect on equal citizenship (Culter, 1999), this program also gave China's ordinary audience insightful information and discussion topics with their investigations and publications of government actions. Gradually, a clearer and greater sense of human rights, obligations, responsibilities and common social values was cultivated and inspired among the population. So, to a certain degree, the traditional media in China were starting to act as props of the public sphere (Wang & Bates, 2008).

At the same time, there were "dual civil societies" in Deng's reform period. The first pattern of civil society refers to organizations, which represented the "opening up of the political system, limitations of state power, and the advancement of the rights of autonomous groups and individuals" (Frolic, 1997: 56). The second type of civil society refers to the ones that functioned as supportive mechanisms to the Communist Party during 1980s (Fouser, 2001, cited from Yang, 2003: 271). Compared with the first pattern, the second pattern, with its state-led characteristics, could apparently conform better to the realities of Party-dominated China. In fact, this kind of Party/State-dominated civil society already existed in the 1950s, before the *Cultural Revolution* (1966-1976). For instance, the government-controlled religious associations were all allowed to have their publications, such as 中国佛教协会 (The Buddhist Association of China, 1953- ), 中国天主教爱国会 (The Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, 1958- ). As long as they did not try to contravene the Party/State directives, they were free to control their finely delimited fields of activity. In general, after 1949, they were gradually taken under stricter control or – in most cases – integrated into the Party-state system. Then, in the 1980s, Deng implemented a softer regulation of civil society entities. So the Party paid more attention to co-opt and utilize potential active elements in the masses. The Department of Social Organizations (社团司, *shetuan si*) within the Ministry of Civil Affairs was established in 1988.<sup>(3)</sup> Accordingly, the form of state-dominated civil society

returned back, and became an important partner of the state in meeting societal needs (Simon, 2009). As a result, two kinds of the reinvigorated civil society existed together in China's reform period. It was the state-led one dominating at most of the time (Frolic, 1997: 56-60).

In all, thanks to Deng's reform, positive trends have emerged since the 1980s. The intellectuals' contribution and impact got confirmed. The media has transformed to serve two masters (the Party and the public) and to do investigative journalism on behalf of the common people. There were also two patterns of civil societies functioning together under the implementation of a softer regulation of civil society entities. It seemed that all factors were in favor of the public sphere's growth.

## (2) Questions in the authoritarian market society

Nevertheless, it was only one side of the coin. The transformation in China's economy and politics led to new questions and challenges as well.

For example, the reform has brought a widened socio-economic gap to a certain degree. When it comes to the media consumption, from 1992 to 1999, the market force did not only increase its attractiveness for young people (Tang, 2005: 90-91), but also created differentiation between those who has media access and those who has not (Tang, 2005: 99-100). Statistics also showed that, every ten years of education would increase media consumption by 20% by 1999, which was only 10% in 1992. It means that the impact of education on media consumption doubled during less than 10 years. Moreover, also by 1999, more developed cities (such as Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenyang) had clearly got higher media consumption rates than the inland cities (Tang, 2005: 91).

Besides, the reform did not bring a full autonomy to China's media or to other public sectors. The media, even reformed, still differed from other countries, where privately owned media dominated the market. The reforms were simply at the level of operation, and newspapers and broadcasting stations were still kept under the control of the state (Li, 2008: 50). It ended up with a "Communist-capitalist" model with the feature of "one system, two operations (一元制度, 两元运行, *yi yuan zhi du, liang yuan yun xing*)". Specifically, the "one system" means, the media were owned by the state. While the "two operations" means, the journalism at this time was aiming at both ideological conformity as well as exploitation for profit. Accordingly, journalists were not only playing the ideological roles for the Party, but also working as "profit-makers" (Chin-Chuan Lee, 2005: 109; Hu, 2006, in Chinese).

Furthermore, the reform brought opportunities and challenges to the foreign-owned media at the same time. For instance, the CETV (*China Entertainment Television*: a production company and satellite broadcaster, providing a mixture of entertainment-style programming) became the first foreign company to enter China's media market after the 1978 reform. As early as April 1979, the CETV, which was called *the Robert Chua Production House Co Ltd (RCP.)* at that time, had started to sell foreign TV advertising directly into China (*SouthChinaMorningPost*, 1979). After distributing the foreign programming from 1984, it was allowed to launch satellite broadcasting in 1994. On the one side, CETV was very successful in the market. It got a high penetration rate at 88.7% in Beijing in 1996 (Television Asia, 1996, cited from Weber, 2003: 282). On the other side, CETV's success was quite associated with its “*no sex, no violence, no news*” strategy, which in fact prioritized the cultivation of relationships with Chinese government (Weber, 2003: 282). In this sense, the programming embedded with cultural and political sensitivities – such as sex, violence, democracy, human rights and religion – were well reined by the state. The Party's regulation and attitude still played the dominant role in controlling China's media, even for the foreign-owned media.

Additionally, the power of the “dual civil societies” was questionable. There was actually a lack of independence in public sectors. In higher education institutions, as an example, the civil society existing among supposedly autonomous professors and students was circumscribed and very much under the domination of the government (Hayhoe & Zhong, 1997: 123). Anyhow, the state always had the capacity to stifle or harness any demands for autonomy. Nobody had the ability or the will to challenge the Party by means of traditional ways of civil society (Frolic, 1997: 67). In other words, while the channels for citizen participation had expanded in the reform era, they were neither adequate nor sufficiently open to the broader citizenry (Yang, 2003: 414).

As a whole, it was a funnel-shaped environment for the media and the “dual civil societies” at this time. It means that, under the impact of economic reform in the authoritarian society, China was somehow reshaped with a narrow top and a bell-shaped bottom (Tang, 2005: 99). The top of the power center was slightly flattened due to the replacement of the supreme leader by the small group of top leaders; while the channel of interest articulation at the top remained narrow. Yet the range of societal interests at the bottom was much broader than in the totalitarian period, in which the interest articulation looked more “like a pencil” (with the sharpened tip as the supreme leader; the small sloped portion as the top aids; as well as the long and narrow body as the channel for expressing opinions and the range of permitted social interests) (Tang, 2005: 28-30).

In all, Deng's reform brought divided outcomes. On the positive side, the Party has given up the harsh content censorship and the financial monopoly over media field. The increasing market competition promoted the diversity of media production. The emergence of investigative journalism also helped to heighten media credibility and trustworthiness among consumers. Besides, the Party's decentralization policy also offered a promising potential for political democratization. So, different kinds of non-state organizations got relatively tolerant environment to expand. On the negative side, the market force created a widening social gap based on status and wealth. Also, both the domestic and foreign media were still well controlled by the Party state. Since the government became more sophisticated and pragmatic to deal with political relationship with the media and the public, the system of "dual civil societies" was actually living in a dynamic and complex funnel-shaped environment. Then, in 1994, the Internet entered China's authoritarian market society. The information and communication technologies' (ICTs) potential in enhancing connections between the public and the media, and in promoting democratic politics has been highly concerned. So, next chapter will look at the development of China's public sphere in the Internet and new media time.

### **Chapter Three: Development of China's public sphere in the Internet and new media age**

No one could deny that the Internet has revolutionized the way people communicate and access information. China benefits from the Internet technology as well. Since 1994 when China for the first time officially joined the global Internet bandwagon, it has been a kind of Internet revolution in China with sensational growth during a few years. There has been a distinct rise in numbers of websites and netizen population. According to the figures released by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), the number of Internet surfers reached 103 million until 30 June 2005. This number is on the second place only after United States at that time (Tai, 2006: 119). However, only after 3 years, another report also from the CNNIC indicates that China has already become the most populated country online with 253 million Internet users by July 2008. Meanwhile, the United States, having estimated 218 million, is on the second place (Webster, 2009: 4).

Along with several revolutionary features – such as being decentralized and open, being theoretically accessible to any citizen, and being difficult to censor – the Internet has been heralded as the single most important communication breakthrough since 1950s. As many critics argue, the Internet has facilitated the environment for what Habermas has defined as the “public sphere”. In this sense, the Internet-based communication symbolizes and presages a vital step in the democratic development in politics. So, for China, the Internet may have wider impact rather than simply mediating people's daily communication. Most importantly, it may give alternative channels for the Chinese to speak out their political needs, which in the end builds up a real civil society in China. This is kind of thinking which had been less wishful and realistic before the Internet emerged.

Moreover, when it comes to the Internet's political potential, a comparison between South Korea and Japan in 1990s suggests interesting outcomes. On the one side, Japan was normally considered as a nation of technophiles at that time. It was the first country to embrace high-speed trains in 1964. It was also one of the countries having highest rates of mobile phone diffusion in the world. But, according to netizens' behavior and attitude towards computer-mediated communication, the South Koreans were more enthusiastic and active about using the Internet as a communication tool and a channel for information exchange. So, in front of such phenomenon, Fouser (2001: 273) offers one possible interpretation: it is about Koreans “desire for free expression that had been suppressed during the years of dictatorship that ended in 1987”. Given this assumption was correct, the Chinese people should then have more desires and demands for freedom of expression and

political participations, possibly even more than the Koreans. On this point, the Internet should play more than a tool for communication. In a sense, it has been more viewed as a political weapon in a country like China, which has not enough political democracy and freedom of the press.

Nonetheless, expecting the approach of democratization facilitated by the revolutionary Internet in China may also be utopian. For example, as Dewey's "*The Public and Its Problems (1927)*" has argued that, the technology can attract people's attention from political affairs. So, in a way, technologies may also create problems for democracy. Moreover, the increasing possibility of governmental and corporation surveillance, the Networks' commercialization and marketization, and the potential for igniting anti-democratic or extremist anti-governmental sentiments, can also be severe inhibition on the road leading to democracy in China (Li, Qin & Randolph, 2003: 143).

In all, it is still unknown yet whether the informational and technological revolution could eventually promise a future with a "third wave of democratization". This chapter, being divided into four parts, will target these contentious questions and try to draw a picture for China's Net-based political change.

### **Part One: Nature of the Internet as "*the fourth place*"**

In Ray Oldenburg's (1997) opinion, "*the third place*" or so-called "*Great Good place*" refer to somewhere, in which people "hang out for the pleasure of good company and lively conversation"; and in which "community, citizenship, and grass-roots democracy come to life" (Tai, 2006: 165). Good examples of "the third place" range from the German beer garden, the English pub, the French Café and the Chinese teahouse. But, in this "third place", the media's impact may not get enough considerations. The connection between media and the public is not well emphasized.

However, for the Internet, since it allows the surfers to be as consumer and creator of information at the same time, it actually bears similarities to real-life communication prototypes, as in "the third place". Besides, with the two most prominent features (interactivity and interaction),<sup>(4)</sup> it can also help people with more social interactions rather than simply having conversations. Moreover, compared with "the third place", the Internet is also more helpful in building communications between the media and the public. In this sense, it may become not precise enough to simply treat the Internet as another type of "the third place". So, Kathleen Olsen (2005: 17) starts to call for "a more appropriate metaphor" for the Internet. Then, following the idea of "*third place*", Tai (2006) proposes a more radical viewpoint about the Internet. He concerns the Internet as "*the fourth place*" with four explanations:

“First of all, the Internet has created a brand new social space that is unlike anything in the history of human communication. It is not only informational, but also participational.

Secondly, Internet-based communication extends beyond relations in the physical world and redefines them. As Tim Berner-Lee (inventor of the Web) (1999) notes, the World Wide Web was invented as a tool to break away from the constraints of time and space.

Thirdly, the Internet has generated a potential that no previous media form has been able to achieve. The innovative use of cyberspace and the ties, social relations, and activities it engenders are what have revolutionized the Internet as a social arena.

Lastly, it is not a monolithic object or tool for its users and it is fair to say no two persons’ experiences on the Internet are exactly alike. As Jennifer Light (1999) argues, the Internet presents exciting opportunities to reinvigorate civic engagement in new ways (Tai, 2006: 169-171).”

Particularly, when it comes to decentralization of politics and de-monopolization of information access, this network-mediated communication overshadows traditional ways:

- a) The authoritarian state finds it more difficult to censor and control;
- b) As a low-budget medium, the Internet is accessible to the most varied range of political groups;
- c) Even smaller political groupings have a public impact, rather than coming to grief on the news threshold of the large media;
- d) Journalism no longer functions as the ‘gatekeeper’ for authoritarian states;
- e) The uniform platform of the World Wide Web makes it easier for social and political movements to pursue strategies of internationalization and to form alliances (Hafez, 2007: 114).

Obviously, the Internet is much less constrained by the state, the media or the masses. It promises people a greater chance to access information. Most importantly, it assists people to stand out and appeal for the political democratization.

## **Part Two: The Internet's two-sided impact on political democracy**

Since the Internet has such a huge power on generating public opinion and changing politics, scholars and politicians have eagerly argued about its impact in various ways. Basically, there are two divided opinion blocs: optimists and pessimists.

### **1. Arguments for the Internet-stimulated Democracy**

It is undeniable that the Internet has the ability to create a sphere where people can supervise state power, criticizing governmental wrongdoing and influencing public policy-making (Zhao, 2005, in Chinese). For instance, the online Bulletin Board System (BBS) which were working actively at the early stage of computer networking, provided a myriad virtual spaces and contributed to the emergence of “virtual communities” (Rheingold, 1992, 2000). These virtual communities have obviously positive impact on the expansion on public sphere in the real world (Tang & Shi, 2001). So, optimistically thinking, even with the restrictions from a still somehow authoritarian government, the Internet as a public sphere can still be an improvement compared to the other media (Wang & Bates, 2008: 11-12). This kind of argument has been repeatedly presented by various people.

First of all, in Paulina Borsook's (1995) *Wired* piece, “*How Anarchy Works*,” she views the Internet government as the “kind of direct populist democracy that most of us have never experienced.” Hence, she praises the Internet as a good network, where some intractable problems of human governance could be well solved. As Bill Clinton tells, the Internet will “democratize opportunity in the world in a way that has never been the case in all of human history.”

Further, Professor Eugene Volokh (1995) presents the “blogger theory” in his *Cheap Speech and What It Will Do*. He promotes the potential of Net-based communication for changing the picture of national deliberations. So to speak, instead of the traditional media, the Internet could be used as a channel for the scrutiny of government. Yochai Benkler's (2006) *The Wealth of Networks*, Dan Gilmour's (2004) *We the Media*, as well as Glenn Reynolds' *An Army of Davids* (2007), all give full treatment of such a thesis. As Benkler (2006) states, the growth of the Internet has “fundamentally altered the capacity of individuals, acting alone or with others, to be active participants in the public sphere as opposed to its passive readers, listeners, or viewers.....It is in this sense that the Internet democratizes.”

Additionally, Hermes (2006) agrees that the Internet facilitates a new type of citizenship commitment, combining exchange of information and evaluation. So, it actually comes closer to the “marketplace of ideas” at the heart of the democratic ideal (Wang and Bates, 2008: 6-7). Essentially, “the Internet and globalization, are acting like nutcrackers to open societies (Thomas Friedman, 2007).

The last but not the least, there are many encouraging comments about China's cyber democracy.



For instance, George W. Bush stated that the Internet takes “freedom's genie.....out of the bottle” in China. More boldly, Nicolas Kristof (2005) writes, “the Chinese leadership.....is digging the Communist Party's grave, by giving the Chinese people broadband.” Of course, the Chinese experts and politicians understand the Internet as a tool for democracy promotion as well. Premier Wen Jiabao (温家宝) used to say “我希望网络成为民众与中央沟通的平台 (*I hope the Internet can become a communication platform between the public and the government.*)”. Xu Youyu (徐友渔, a Chinese philosopher and public intellectual) also confirms Internet's power in China's democracy administration: “尽管封锁压制十分厉害, 但公共舆论还是借助于网络常有突破, 中国近年来在法治方面偶有进步, 大都得力于网络传播影响 (*Although the censorship is harsh, the Internet-driven public opinion has made breakthrough. Under the impact of Internet communication, China has occasionally achieved progress in laws in these years.*)”.<sup>(5)</sup> Further, Hu Yong (胡泳, professor in School of journalism and communication, Beijing University) concerns the potential of online public opinion: “中国网民有能力形成网络舆论, 使之对执政党形成压力, 进而影响网上热议事件的最终决议 (*Chinese netizens have the ability to generate online public opinion, and to expand it into pressure to the Party. In this way, it affects the final resolution of issues which are under feverish online discussions.*)”. Yang Guobin (杨国斌, professor in Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures, Columbia University) confirms the interactions between the Internet and civil society in China: “互联网将促进中国公民社会的发展, 同时公民社会也会刺激互联网的进步 (*The Internet will promote the Chinese civil society's development. Meanwhile, the growing civil society will stimulate the Internet's improvement.*)” (my translation from the Chinese).<sup>(6)</sup>

In general, all these viewpoints promise a brighter future of China's political democratization and liberalization. It then makes the idea of improving public sphere and civil society more promising.

## 2. Skepticism about the Net-based political freedom

When some advocates argue for the huge power from the Internet to improve participatory and representative democracy, the others believe this electronic cyberspace may not be effective enough at times. Moreover, some effects may be even negative. Compared with the Athenian direct participatory democracy, which has always been worshiped as the metaphor of ideal form of democracy, the Internet seems to be often called “the second best solution” (Brants, 1996: 65).

To begin with, digital divide still exists in the world. “Those who can access online information are equipped with additional tools to be more active citizens and participants of the public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002: 15)” than those who do not have the access. There must always be somebody

marginalized or privileged in the virtual cyberspace. As Hafez (2007: 106) points out, “digital divide” has two implications: first, it describes the deficits in the development and use of information and communication technologies on a global scale, that is, when comparing highly industrialized and developing countries. On this point, unlike Norway and Finland where the Internet is usually considered a common communication tool, the Internet in the sub-Saharan Africa with quite low Internet penetration functions as an elite tool. Furthermore, the second implication refers to imbalances between informational elite and peripheries, typical of most countries of the world (Hafez, 2007: 106). This case in China is ambiguous. In the beginning, the Internet in China seemed to be mainly dominated by urban middle classes, but it does not seem to be quite monopolized any longer today. Now it looks like even striking workers or peasants begin to use Internet and blog to express their grievances on occasion. But, on the basis of survey data from China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2010, in Chinese), the gender difference and regional disparity still exist. Until today, surfing on the Internet is a male-dominated activity. In December 2009, 54.2% of the Chinese netizens were male and 45.8% were female. However, this gender gap widened during 6 months. It becomes 54.8% male surfers, compared with 45.2% female in June 2010. Same situation happens between the urban and rural regions. At the end of 2009, rural netizens took up 27.8% of the Chinese netizen population, compared with 72.2% urban Internet users. But, until June 2010, the percentage of rural surfers reduced to 27.4%; and the netizens in urban climbed to 72.6%. It means that the growth rate in urban districts is faster than in the rural regions.

Then, on the basis of the digital divide and class polarization, “the political and economic big boys” are still playing the leading roles. The political powers can keep implementing harsh information control in a more sophisticated way; and the commercial entities, which have dominated traditional mass media, can keep their advantages on the Internet landscape. So, Lippmann's doubts about the possibility to link liberty and the true news are still unsolved. The public sphere's ambivalent nature in democratic potential still receives challenges from the electronic mass media, as Habermas (1992: 456-457) tells. Specifically for China, under the influence of globalization, similar trends have taken place. The state and the state-owned media easily keep their ruling position. So, rather than dealing with the social conflicts, the Internet's “greatest impact” may simply lie in “intensifying existing social contradictions (Hartford, 2000 cited in Yang, 2003: 410).”

Lastly, there is an increasing potential for the growth of nationalism or extremism online. In the cyberspace, through the process of “bricolage”, “people reflexively assemble their own particular

versions of reality” (Deuze, 2006: 66; cited from Wang & Bates, 2008: 6). They spend time on logging to their beloved politician's website so as to dig out suitable news for their own interests and values, and also to reinforce their pre-existing political attitudes and beliefs (Wang & Bates, 2008: 6). Additionally, besides obtaining likely-minded online sources, people could also visit other websites they dislike in order to get information which they could somehow disprove later on. Of course, it may be good for improving debating skills and widening perspectives. However, if the netizens go too far in radical thinking, they may risk becoming a part of the single-minded and extreme opposition. Of course, one thing needs to be clarified on this point: the Internet is just a medium; extremists would have existed without it in any case. So to speak, although the Internet could become a medium for articulating and in some cases deepening one's “extremely oppositional” stand, the societal discontent is the main source of extremism. For instance, in Norway with generally low level of societal discontent but universal availability of the Internet, the neo-Nazis and other extremist groups are very small. However, in societies like Russia, racists and other right-wing extremists are popular in the last decade. They do use Internet for organizational and propagandist purposes. But, the reason for Russia's extremism is the social upheavals that followed the Soviet collapse. It is NOT simply because of the Internet (Sova-Center, 2007).

Especially, in terms of the accelerating nationalism in China, Hughes (2000) and Kluver (2001) both think the Internet will be used to promote nationalism rather than democracy in China. Even on China's official tourism website, Munson (1999) finds how nationalism is being “sold” online (Yang, 2003: 410). So, Hafez (2007: 105) argues, China is more and more catching up with the West and is using the Internet in ways that conform to its political system. The multilingual Internet has become a new vehicle for CCP to spread the reinvigorated nationalism in a globalized world. From official media's coverage on the “3.14 Tibet riot”, “anti-CNN” and “anti-BBC” movements before 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, to 5.12 WenChuan Earthquake, the tendency of strengthening nationalism was visible.

All in all, there are two-sided opinions about the Internet's influence in making political changes. For China, on the one hand, the Internet promises the democratization with a new way of citizenship commitment and communication between the state and non-state powers. It may help to democratize China's media and public sphere. On the other hand, the Internet-driven democracy is also contentious. Digital divide, the continuous dominance of “political and economic big boys”, and the growth in the Chinese nationalism are all possible challenges for the improvement of democracy and political freedom.

The next two parts, from the case of Sun Zhigang Incident in earlier time and the performance of China's social network sites, especially the microblogs' impact in recent two years, will try to analyze to what extent the Internet and new media have affected China's political freedom and the role of civil society.

### **Part Three: Case Study – “Sun Zhigang Incident” in 2003**

The incident with Sun Zhigang is actually a memorable case, which shows how a good co-operation between the traditional media and the Chinese netizens significantly changed the development of a constitutional case. This following part will fully concentrate on this case, so as to provide the readers a clearer and deeper understanding of the tremendous development and transformation within China's media landscape.

First of all, I will give a brief introduction on the background and course of this issue. Then, the performance and engagement by the traditional media will be focused on. The significant influence coming from the Internet will be explored as the third question. Lastly, this incident's meaningful implications and inspirations will be elaborated on in the conclusion.

#### **1. Introduction of “Sun Zhigang Incident”**

On March 17, 2003, Sun Zhigang, who was mistakenly regarded as a “peasant laborer” (民工, *mingong*) by the policemen got detained in a local detention center in Guangzhou, the fifth largest city in China. But, as a matter of fact, Sun Zhigang was a 27-year-old graduate from Wuhan Technical College. When he got caught by the detention authorities, he had only been in Guangzhou for a few days for working as a graphic designer for a clothes factory. Unfortunately, during such a short period of time, he did not obtain a temporary residence permit issued by the local government. Therefore, without any deeper investigation, the staff working in the detention center treated Sun Zhigang in the same way as they treated other peasant laborers, harshly beating and rudely humiliating him. On March 18, after a long time of interrogation and beating, Sun Zhigang was sent to an ill-equipped clinic designed especially for patients from various custody and repatriation center. Here, in this clinic, on March 20, he was finally pronounced dead.

Sun Zhigang's friends tried many ways to reveal the truth of his death. They did not see any hope until they got contact with the *Southern Metropolis News* (南方都市报, *Nanfang Dushi Bao*). After some detailed and comprehensive reports in the traditional (that is, paper) newspapers in

Guangzhou, Sun Zhigang's death ignited an overwhelming reaction among the Chinese netizens too. Then, the traditional media and the Internet worked hand in hand, doing the investigative reporting and informing the public on the case. They created an extraordinarily open and healthy platform for the public discussions and debates. Through this new but powerful channel, a clear and genuine public opinion became a noticeable influential factor when the government was making public policy. In the end, Premier Wen Jiabao signed a decree abolishing the “*Measures for Internment and Deportation of Urban Vagrants and Beggars* (城市流浪乞讨人员收容遣送办法, 1982)” after a State Council conference on June 20, 2003.

Sun Zhigang's case is really an “ordinary citizens' victory” in the information age. This is a case in which public discussions and debates were prompted by an ordinary citizen's death, directly resulting in abolishment of a 20-year-old national law. This outcome is completely unprecedented in the history of the People's Republic of China (Wang & Bates, 2008: 12).

Before looking at how the traditional media and Chinese netizens performed and contributed to such a remarkable outcome in Sun Zhigang's case, there are three unique factors which should be mentioned and clarified as background.

The first information refers to the “peasant laborers” and their social status in China. Before, due to China's rigid household register system (户口, *hukou system*), there were really tight controls on rural-urban migration. In fact, the *hukou* system was an “unequal exchange” choice made by the 1949 newborn China. With a priority on the development of heavy industry, the state had to block free flows of resources between the agricultural and industrial sectors. The *hukou* system, aiming at controlling labor immigrations, was implemented from 1958. With its dual classifications on both *suozaidi* (所在地, the place of *hukou* registration) and *leibie* (类别, the status or type of *hukou* registration: agricultural or nonagricultural), the state budget prioritized urban citizens in regard to employment, housing, medical facilities, police protection and other amenities of life (Banister, 1987). For a long time, it played a crucial role in consolidating the socialist system and public interests (Luo, 1958). However, since the 1970s nationwide reforms, especially due to the development of national and foreign-invested manufacturing industries, the state started to loosen control on citizens' migration. Gradually, it led to a running migration flood towards some of the big cities in China, such as Beijing and Shanghai. People gave the migrants a new name - “peasant laborers”. Literally, it represents those groups of people, who move from the under-developed farming countryside to flourishing cities, to look for work or carry out business (Li, 2008: 48).

According to *the 2000 census*, the number of peasant laborers has climbed up to 80 million (Li, 2008: 48).

Such a massive entry of peasant laborers no doubt presented an unprecedented burden on the infrastructure of the big cities. Hence, in 1982, the State Council showed their intention to deal with people who “roam around begging in the city” (Li, 2008: 49). Then, the earlier mentioned “*Measures for Internment and Deportation of Urban Vagrants and Beggars*” was born. This regulation clarified that the non-local people living on the street and without reliable means of self-support are subject to being detained and returned to their original domicile under the care of local authorities. Normally, all these people were mostly classified as “*Three Have-Nots* (三无人员, *sanwu renyuan*)” -- no regular home, no stable income, and no legal ID (Tai, 2006, 260).

Living and working in urban areas, on the one side, they are highly needed as cheap laborers; on the other side, they do not have access to all the benefits that urban inhabitants enjoy, such as health, unemployment and old-age insurance (Li, 2008: 49). So in fact, the peasant laborers make up a marginalized social group emerging from China's fast transformation to a market economy. Although the temporary residence system allowed them to stay and to work for a short period of time, the premise is they must complete certain registration procedure and get some valid papers and documents from the local authorities. Otherwise, they would be at the risk of being found out and then beaten to death, as what has happened on Sun Zhigang.

The second unique factor leading to the different outcome of this incident is Sun Zhigang's actual identity. He was actually a university graduate rather than a real peasant laborer. It is for sure one crucial factor that led this incident to an unexpected direction (Tai, 2006: 261). As Tai (2008, 261) marks: on the same day that Sun Zhigang was detained, there were other 110 people in the local detention center as well. Few people knew who they were, and what they suffered during that period of detention. Besides, from March 16 to March 19, prior to the death of Sun, three others died, with two from some types of illness and one from internal bleeding in the head. Compared with these unknown detainees, Sun Zhigang's identity did help to attract more interest to this issue.

Lastly, the third element is that, Sun Zhigang's case happened in Guangzhou, rather than other under-developed places in China. As being mentioned earlier, it is the fifth largest city in China. With its advantageous geographic location alongside the southeast coast, Guangzhou has had an outstandingly rapid growth since the 1990s. It has become in the forefront of manufacturing

industries and commerce as well as import-export activities with almost 10 million inhabitants in 2000. As Li (2008: 51) points out, this city should be regarded as a sign of things to come in other parts of China. In this way, it is fair to concern Guangzhou as a representative place of news media transformation as well. The tremendous economic shift has caused apparent changes in the field of media structure and behaviors. The media (being part of the reform) with more autonomy, could of course show more interest and moral concern towards such marginalized groups when defending the peasant laborers (who are also a part of the reform) (Li, 2008: 48).

In a sense, this is a rare case when China's marketized traditional media opened up good opportunities for the weak and the powerless to speak out. Meanwhile, thanks to a strong opinion and sympathy expressed by numerous Chinese netizens, the Net-fueled rage and sadness resulting from Sun Zhigang's death become another important factor influencing the Party's public policy-making. So, the following content will respectively look at how the traditional media and the online public behaved.

## 2. Within the traditional media landscape

### (1) The role of traditional media on "Sun Zhigang Incident": falling into two categories

Long time before Sun Zhigang's case, the coverage of peasant laborers and their living conditions in Guangzhou had become a popular and noticeable topic in the local traditional print media. After analyzing four Guangzhou local newspapers' reporting on peasant laborers from beginning of 2000 to June 2003, Li (2008) actually found out two broad categories of reporting. One is "the conventional reporting on government actions under the detention and dispatch policy"; and the other is "reports revealing cases of harm inflicted on peasant laborers in the process".

The four newspapers Li chose were: *Southern Metropolis News* (南方都市报, *Nanfang dushi bao*), *Yangcheng Evening News* (羊城晚报, *Yangcheng wanbao*), *Guangzhou Daily* (广州日报, *Guangzhou ribao*), as well as *Nanfang Daily* (南方日报, *Nanfang ribao*). These four newspapers are state-controlled but simultaneously market-dependent on different levels. Generally speaking, *the Southern Metropolis News* is the one which has been most marketized and liberalized by the reforms. From the day it was established on January 1, 1997, it has obtained a full autonomy. As an independent economic entity (独立经济实体, *duli jingji shiti*), its operation depends on its own market-derived income (Zhao, 2004, in Chinese). Then, *the Nanfang Daily* is the one nearest to the local government. The other two are somehow standing in between.

In Li's (2008: 52) opinion, before Sun Zhigang's case, regardless of their level of market orientation or political commitment, most of the reports belonged to the first category, such as the one on 17, Oct 2001 in *the Nanfang Daily*:

“The author learnt from the Guangzhou police station that, since September, all units of public security departments in the Guangzhou city have been deployed.....vigorously developing the work of detention. About 12,900 people who roam around begging and belong to the category of the “three no(s)” were held and 9,600 people were sent back. This helps to create a conducive and safe environment for the Guangzhou Export Commodities Fair's convention (Li, 2008: 52).”

In this kind of reports, it seems like journalists' information resources come from relevant government department rather than from their own in-depth investigations. Besides, the purpose of these reports is clearly to propagate the encouraging achievement on the part of governmental agencies and the police. They demonstrate obvious ignorance of the life, freedom and safety of the peasant laborers (Li, 2008: 52).

With regards to the second category, it contains more critical and insightful questions. The investigative reporters give particular descriptions and profound commentaries about peasant laborers' bodily injuries, property infringement as well as other grievances related to the detention centers or forcible dispatch back. From this perspective, the peasant laborers are treated as “human beings” or “people”, while the detention and dispatch system is portrayed as the reason for certain social problems with no great administrative merits (Li, 2008: 53). Moreover, the peasant laborers also play the role of a first-handed information provider to the journalists.

Accordingly, traditional media's coverage and behavior on Sun Zhigang's case have well pointed to the fact of Li's two broad categories as well.

For example, *the Southern Metropolis News*, as the leading commercial media in Guangzhou, is the first newspapers that got engaged in Sun Zhigang's case. They published Sun's story and carried editorials on newspapers on April, 25, 2003. They made sure his story available on website, *Nanfang Wang* (南方网, Southern Net) at the same time (Tai, 2006: 262). With the headline of “Who is responsible for the unusual death of a citizen? (谁为一个公民的非正常死亡负责, *Shui wei yige gongmin de feizhengchang siwang fuze*)”, *the Southern Metropolis News* successfully caught the reader's eyes and attention. Its “exclusive” report and many other explicit commentaries with



pointed questions are mostly falling in Li's second category. Besides, they offered hotline to their readers, where the latter got opportunities to express points of view or to show grievances and dissatisfaction towards the authorities. It is, in a sense, really a place for "social thinking" (Li, 2008: 55). Even more, although during a certain period of time, its follow-up investigations were restricted by the Propaganda Department, *the Southern Metropolis News* did excellent job in the post-event stage as well. After being motivated and empowered by a written statement from the Beijing University law professors to the National People's Congress (*ChinaElections.org* 中国选举与治理网, 2006, in Chinese), *the Southern Metropolis News* moved towards emphasis on rational discussions on the detention and dispatch system with experts. They started to focus on in-depth analyses and explanations of this kind of issues' constitutional implications. In conclusion, on Sun Zhigang's case, *the Southern Metropolis News* did play a prominent and irreplaceable role when it comes to the continuous investigations, expression of public opinions as well as the re-examination of the constitutionality in China's law system.

Furthermore, compared with *the Southern Metropolis News*, despite *the Yangcheng Evening News* and *the Guangzhou Daily* did not carry out as many independent investigations as the former, they still republished articles from other newspapers as long as the relevant official department had made the governmental standpoint clear. As Li (2008: 54) says, they employed "the suffering distress" narrative frame to engender sympathy...and pointed "a finger at the authorities concerned".

The last but not the least, *the Nanfang Daily* covered Sun Zhigang's incident from the governmental remedial perspective. Since they have never done any investigative report to expose the abuses against peasant laborers, it was quite different from the other three newspapers. Most of their articles came within Li's first category. They firmly celebrated the wise and decisive policy-making by the government, all their duties stemming from their traditional role as the Party newspapers. So mostly, the aims of their pieces of news are to assuage popular sentiments, to reduce condemnation of the government provoked by more independent journalists, to protect the authority of the Party and government, and to help the government to implement social management as well (Li, 2008: 54).

Therefore, in all, based on different levels of political control and economic freedom in these four newspapers, their reports about peasant laborer-related cases and Sun Zhigang's incident were actually falling into two categories.

(2) Why the market-driven traditional media were interested in Sun Zhigang's case?

Since this is a rare case when China's marketized traditional media spoke out for the weak and the powerless people, beside the increasing editorial freedom and Sun Zhigang's real identity as a student, what were the other factors that attracted the traditional media in this case? What was the main impetus for the indefatigable journalists to carry on their investigations for Sun Zhigang and the marginalized social groups?

From Li's (2008: 56) point of view, the motivations of journalists could also be classified into two frames: *general public standpoint* as well as *the concern for the weaker social groups*. The former frame guided reporters to stand with commoners and to challenge the authority of the monopolistic Party-state systems. Due to the rules of social psychology, if the media needed more social support from the public, they should pursue and fight for justice as much as possible. As Li (2008: 56) points out:

“There is always a strong cultural orientation towards equality, righteousness and justice, and deep sympathy - towards lower-status groups during a period of social transformation...Market-oriented newspapers that take the general public standpoint framework can be regarded as militating against the culture of inequality created by the *administrative authority*.”

Meanwhile, the second frame made the reporters to dig out social problems with their own heartfelt concern. It means that, the journalists did care about the reasons for Sun Zhigang's death and about other peasant laborers' survival and well-being. “This could be seen as an expression against the culture of inequality created by *social class stratification* (Li, 2008: 56).”

In this sense, if there were two frames functioning at the same time, what was the *main and first* impetus for these marketized newspapers? In Li's (2008: 56) opinion, the first reason played a more significant role than the second one.

It is true that the media tried their best to emphasize their care for “social fairness”, in order to keep and promote public's faith in them. It is also true that the urban middle-class readers showed certain interest in reading news that advocated the rights of the weaker social groups (Li, 2008: 57).

However, because some China's media have become market-driven since the reform in 1970s, the readers with spending power, or the readers that advertizers valued, accordingly became the new masters of the traditional media. Compared with the urban middle-class inhabitants, the peasant

laborers were surely not the majority of reading community in the market. They had neither consistent reading habits nor high spending power. So since the market-oriented structure has led to a new relation between the privileged and the marginalized, the peasant laborers were doomed to be marginalized and peripheralized. As Li (2008: 57) points out, this relation “benefited mainstream city dwellers by providing a cheap workforce to support China's urban boom”. In other words, there was a lack of Adam Smith's “*sympathy*”, or “an intimate expression of the very nature of individual life” between the traditional media and the peasant laborers. The traditional media's coverage on Sun Zhigang's incident and other peasant laborers' cases touched upon concerns about the powerless people's individual rights. But, there was a hidden ignorance of a “more structural critique of class conflict” coming from the social class stratification. Therefore, it may be still difficult to claim that the market-oriented traditional media have completely become the voice of marginalized groups (Li, 2008: 57).

### 3. Within the Internet landscape

The Internet's transformative effects are producing huge changes in China's political system. As Liebman and Wu (2007: 7) argue, the effects of the Internet on Chinese legal system are arguably far more profound than in Europe or the United States. The internet offers much more possibilities for enhancing media accountability as well as net justice. In this sense, it fits with the outcome of comparison between Japan and South Korea's netizens. The Koreans “desired for free expression that had been suppressed during the years of dictatorship that ended in 1987”. So, they had more enthusiasm towards computer and the Internet than the Japanese. Compared with the Koreans, the Chinese people, with somehow even less freedom of expression, show more desires with the Internet-based political activities.

On this point, Sun Zhigang's case is a very representative example of how well China's online activism and market-oriented investigative journalism worked in tandem on social issues. Their combination did result in much greater attention to law and the legal system than at any prior point in Chinese history (Liebman & Wu, 2007: 15). In respect to the impacts of the Internet in Sun Zhigang's case, there are generally three points.

In the first place, the Internet made Sun Zhigang's story to spread much more widely and rapidly. Being mentioned before, *the Southern Metropolis News* published Sun Zhigang's story on *Nanfang Wang* (南方网, Southern Net) on the very first day together with their reports and editorial commentary on newspapers. Ever since then, although the local Communist Party Propaganda

Department officials instantly blocked any further discussion of this case in the local media (Liebman & Wu, 2007: 14), actually many large Chinese portal websites had already posted this story without any delay. In this way, a wide range of Chinese online users got to know Sun Zhigang's case and started to concern about Sun's death (Tai, 2006: 263). Special hot topic sections about Sun Zhigang's case were quickly put up online in large numbers. Even on the website of *People's Daily* (人民日报, *Renmin Ribao*), the mouthpiece of the Communist Party, netizens created particular sections named "Death of Sun Zhigang Challenges the Custody and Repatriation System." All these sections did help quite a lot in respect to the latest updates, follow-ups, analysis as well as audience expressions (Tai, 2006: 263). Many other newspapers and online portal websites subsequently reported on Sun Zhigang's case, only after noting *the People's Daily's* standpoint and intentions (Liebman & Wu, 2007: 14). Moreover, many postings and messages in chat rooms and online communities were well collected and used as audience feedback. As Tai (2006: 264-265) writes, on the first day that *the Southern Metropolis News* published this story online, reader's reactions reached 10,000 within the first few hours. On Google, number of items with the key words "Sun Zhigang" amounted over 40,000 items. A huge number of netizen responses happened on *Sohu.com* as well. From popular online Bulletin Board System (BBS), such as *Xici.net* and many other influential web forums, a variety of reports, commentaries as well as visitor messages obviously contributed to public discussions that touched upon the issues of social justice, inequality, legislation, human rights, and constitutionalism (Wang & Bates, 2008: 13-13). The Chinese netizens did not only demand a thorough investigation of Sun's death, but also questioned government's financial interests behind the temporary residence system (*Zhongguowang*, 2003). Both of these requests created pressure on authorities' decision-making process (Tai, 2006: 265).

Next, the Internet created a channel for the Chinese netizens to freely show their attitudes and express their feelings towards Sun Zhigang and other peasant laborers. An enraged software engineer in Hangzhou built up an online memorial page for Sun Zhigang, which was initially titled "Sun Zhigang: You Are Swallowed by the Darkness". Within the first two hours, over 3000 visitors logged on here. Though the title was changed to "Heaven Does Not Require Temporary Residence Permits" next day, still, the hits passed 10,000 in two days. On the morning of May 14, 2003, the number of hits came to 100,000, and the number doubled on June 6 on the second day of the public trial.<sup>(7)</sup> Netizens visited this memorial page with best wishes, comments or donations to Sun's family. It goes without saying that, many of them also criticized police and officials' brutality towards rural residents as lower-class citizens (Tai, 2006: 264). Accordingly, the Chinese netizens' voluntary involvement and participation in this sort of cases was different from that by the media

staff. Compared with the market-driven media landscape, most of the netizens were doing right things with their heartfelt sympathy to these marginalized groups.

The last point of all, the Internet's powerful impact did not actually end with the trial. More importantly, it tightly linked Sun Zhigang's case together with the abolishment of an obsolete law concerning detention system. Following the arrests of 13 suspects (among them, 12 were convicted for their roles in the cases, and two “primary culprits” were respectively sentenced to death and life in prison) in May, two groups of lawyers and scholars issued petitions calling for this system to be abolished since it was unconstitutional (*RenMinWang*, 2003; *XinHuaWang*, 2003, in Chinese). These petitions got massive support from both the print and the online media. Therefore, although the petitions themselves were not printed in full in the official media, they were easily accessible online (Liebman & Wu, 2007: 14). In this way, both Sun Zhigang's unusual death and many other murders under detention were exposed and noticed by the media and by the public. It led to a widespread offline and online discussion in relation to the unconstitutional detention and dispatch system. In a sense, websites gave remarkably wider-ranging debating spheres for this kind of cases than those appearing in traditional print media (Liebman & Wu, 2007: 15).<sup>(8)</sup> Besides, when the abolition of this discriminatory treatment of the peasant laborers was announced, the cyberspace was full of positive messages. The Chinese netizens were happy to show their approval of the performance by the new government led by Premier Wen Jiabao. On June 18, there were almost 156 pages of postings as well as more than 9,000 messages on *Sina's* (新浪) special page debating this issue (Tai, 2006: 265).

To sum up, in Sun Zhigang's case, the Internet has played an irreplaceable role as a revolutionary medium of communication. To a certain extent, the Internet has filled in the place of Western polling organizations in China, especially in the area of politics (Tai, 2006: 265). Indeed, the overwhelming coverage of the story by the online media created great pressure for the investigative team to uncover the truth of the incident (Lin and Zhao, 2003, cited from Tai, 2006: 265). Besides, by using the Internet, civil society found a good platform for online participation and public debates. As a result, the overwhelming public opinion forced a certain degree of responsiveness on the authorities. It was the Chinese netizens and online activist groups playing the leading role and making democratic improvement.

#### 4. Meanings and implications of “Sun Zhigang Incident”

(1) Good and successful co-operation between the traditional print media and the Internet

A smooth and inter-dependent relationship between the conventional print media and the cyberspace is a really important factor with respect to the satisfactory ending of Sun Zhigang's incident.

On the one side, the traditional print media enjoyed more power to reveal a serious news topic. In accordance with Chinese regulations on the internet, online websites' ability to create their own news content was restricted. But, the traditional media were allowed to generate news stories on most of the occasions. According to a 2004 report, there were only 163 legally qualified websites which could publish news. Most of them were linked to the national, provincial and local Communist Party newspapers. At the same time, 1400 could only offer "news service", namely, they were just permitted to reprint information that have already been covered in the official media (Liebman and Wu, 2007: 19). In Sun Zhigang's case, it was the traditional print newspapers, *the Southern Metropolis News*, which primarily uncovered this sensitive topic. Then it was the online websites that intensely followed up.

On the other side, the Internet is more flexible and allows more freedom to discuss social problems. It makes sure that a serious news topic can be heard and focused by much more audience. Prior to the growth of the Internet, even in the commercialized media, such as *Southern Weekend* (南方周末, *Nanfang Zhoumo*), in-depth discussions of certain local cases were often discontinued. Since it was relatively easy for the Propaganda Department officials to terminate further investigative reports, some of the news topics had already disappeared before they reached the readers (Liebman & Wu, 2007: 15). Also, after a piece of news already has been revealed, most of the traditional media would still wait with remarking it until government has made an official decision. But, the online media are seemingly more active to comment on pending cases with more subjectivity (Liebman & Wu, 2007:19). In Sun Zhigang's case, without the first post on the *Nanfang Wang* on the first day, this news would probably only be noticed by few people. Without the article on *People's Daily* website showing the attitude of CCP's mouthpiece, many other media would not dare to give further coverage. Lastly, some cases showed that, when the local propaganda authorities spontaneously blocked local media from digging deeply into local cases, it was media from other regions or media on other administrative levels that were first to post the case. Sometimes, it was media in other provinces that boldly gave a special focus, which made the corresponding case into a distinctive news topics (Liebman and Wu, 2007).<sup>(9)</sup> So, it is fair to say that, without support from Beijing and many other cities' websites, Sun Zhigang's news would not have received such online attention.

To conclude, in Sun Zhigang's case, story was initially publicized by the traditional media. Then, it was so actively discussed online that the traditional media turned to use the Internet as a useful tool for tracking the public's new big concern. Due to an undeniable digital divide, it was true that online citizens only made up a small proportion of the Chinese population at that time. But, what interested the netizens would probably also interest the general audience. In this way, the instant online campaign meant that this case was worth pursuing further (Tai, 2006: 264). As a result, the national news organizations, such as *People's Daily* and *Xinhua News Agency*, together with many other regional newspapers and lots of online websites, all contributed to the success of Sun Zhigang's case. Although compared with the netizens' voluntary involvement in online activities, the market-driven media might do the reports with less heartfelt sympathy, the media indeed worked as a link as Garbriel de Tarde concerns: it did not simply set public discussion topics; but also facilitated "considered" public opinion into political pressure to the government. Finally, there were 23 officials given administrative sanctions for their mishandling of this case (Liebman & Wu 2007: 14, Note 39). To a certain degree, it is indeed a victory of China's media landscape.

## (2) Dynamic but uncertain interactions between the government, the media and the public

To begin with the hopes, Sun Zhigang's incident presented a good model of institutional reforms in China's public policy-making. It was a relatively liberal policy-making process, which was rarely done before. First of all, there were a variety of opinions and suggestions from the public, the experts and also the media. The public participations and opinions became the first and the most important stage of the public policy process. Then, the government took the responsibility on the basis of collecting and considering opinions from all around. After balancing different interests, the government finally formulated a strategy which served the whole nation's best. In this sense, Sun Zhigang's case reflected positive Internet-based interactions between the government, the media and the public. Since this case did not directly pose threat to the CCP's regime, the government showed more tolerance and adopted a more lenient approach (Tai, 2006: 267).

Besides, another magnificent trend came from the common people, especially the Chinese netizens' political activism. The outcome should be regarded as a momentous advancement in the formation of Chinese civil society (Luo, 2007). A compliment from *Agence France-Presse News Agency* (AFP, 2008) indicates the success in this way: "It may be decades before China gets democracy, but for many Chinese, political participation of sorts is only a mouse click away". Also, Wang and Bates (2008:13) debate the online space's impact as:

“The whole case...demonstrated the growing maturity of public awareness of issues centering on civic rights and responsibilities... is undoubtedly a landmark incident demonstrating the potential of information technology in advancing democracy in China. It is a symbol that online space is an effective impetus to democracy improvement in China.”

Nonetheless, together with this unprecedented outcome, there were also problems and doubts about the possibilities of more equal, partner-like relationship between the state and the non-state forces. At the beginning and during the course of Sun Zhigang's case, there were interventions and prohibitions coming from the relevant officials and authorities. Even after the trial, government imposed restrictions on media's reports. For instance, only three officially licensed media got the permission to send reporters to the trial. Propaganda officials demanded other media to use only reports from the official *Xinhua News Agency*, and Internet portals were requested to terminate further discussion of the case (Liebman & Wu, 2007: 21). Even worse, just a few months after this case, the police raided *the Southern Metropolis News* and detained some top editors, which was regarded as retribution for their aggressive reporting on both the Sun Zhigang incident and the story of SARS. Since one managing edition and another official were sentenced to prison due to alleged corruption in the end, these arrests were accordingly viewed as “the most serious blow to the Chinese media in the last decade (Stern and Hassid, 2010: 15).” In reality, what was painted as “corruption” by the prosecution sometimes was just routine practice in many Chinese newspapers. In this case, this was a way for the state to react and to settle accounts with concerning participants afterwards.

As a whole, the state, the media and the public all tried to maintain a balance in this case. The market-driven media balanced the risk of official sanctions with the realization of profit motive through aggressive and sensational reporting. As for the state, on the one side, it maintained social stability and judicial authority; on the other side, it showed basic respect and recognition of the widespread public opinion both online and offline. Concerning the publics, they kept a balance between expressing their condemnation towards the unconstitutional brutality and not going too far beyond the limitation of the Communist Party's tolerance. In a word, this case presented tense and contentious relationships between the courts, the media, the major internet providers, the population and the Party-State. There were hopes of a growing public awareness on civic rights and responsibilities; there were also doubts concerning the possibilities of enlarging the freedom of the press and the non-state forces in China.



#### **Part Four: Social network sites, microblogs in China**

The social network sites (SNSes) and other new media technologies have been developing in China less than 20 years. They have given tremendous affects in different sectors of China's society. Meanwhile, they have also encountered various problems and limitations. This part will try to study to what extent the Chinese microblog and new media have showed democratic potential in China.

The following content starts from a short background introduction for China's SNSes and microblogs. Then, it is a comparison between *Twitter* and the Chinese microblog. Afterwards, microblog's democratic power and limitations will be analyzed respectively. Finally, it is the conclusion, clarifying the key points about microblog's political impact. Most of the examples I choose in this part are from *Sina Microblog Service* (新浪微博, *Sina Weibo*), which is for now the most influential microblog website with the largest amount of users in China.

When the Internet came into China in 1994, the National Research Center for Intelligent Computing Systems (国家智能计算机研究开发中心) launched mainland China's first Bulletin Board System (BBS), “*Shuguang* (曙光)” in May. The name of this BBS literally means “the dawn”. As this name symbolizes, ever since then, the Internet together with social network sites have been giving Chinese people many expectations about a possible dawn of political democracy and the freedom of speech. Later on, *TianYa* (天涯, [www.tianya.cn](http://www.tianya.cn)) became the first website which combined the Bulletin Board System (BBS) social communities with personal blogs for their users (*NewWeekly*, 2009, in Chinese). The eye-catching and intercommunicative features of BBS increasingly attracted Chinese netizens' attention. Then, the year 2005 became a Year of Blogs in China. Just from January to July 2005, the number of Chinese blogs rapidly climbed from half a million to 5 million (MacKinnon, 2008: 35). An analysis indicates, within a course of a single 24-hour period, the Chinese netizens are nearly three times more active on MSN than users from any other country (Hurst, 2006). Surprisingly and interestingly, by December, the number of Chinese blogs was claimed to be as high as 36.82 million by the Chinese blog search engine *Baidu* (百度) (*RenMinWang*, 2005). It was even higher than the total amount of weblogs in the whole world calculated by weblog-tracking service Technorati (Sifry, 2006). Of course, this statistical gap was partly caused by *Baidu's* extensive calculation including “spam blogs” and the abandoned blogs. After that, under the inspiration of *Twitter* created on 13<sup>th</sup> July 2006, Wang Xing (王兴, a Chinese entrepreneur, founder of several Chinese SNSes) launched China's first online microblog service “*Fanfou*” (饭否) in May 2007. Although *Twitter* was not banned in China until June 2009, *Fanfou* easily attracted the youth because of its interface in Chinese language. However, this service was

shut down by the government in July 2009. In fact, since *Fanfou* refused to censor users' updates during *Xinjiang riots* at that time, it became the first 2.0 website forcedly closed down. The reason, as one colleague of Wang Xing explained: when a simple internet tool turned into a new media channel for the Chinese people, *Fanfou* did not realize the subsequent responsibilities and obligations they were supposed to take (my translation from the Chinese “对于从网络工具转变为媒体工具的过程，我们没有意识到饭否应该承担的责任”) (*Southern Metropolis Weekly*, 2010: 18, in Chinese). It was hard for such a small and independent website to efficiently track and control Chinese users' politically sensitive posts and words (敏感词, *min gan ci*). However, this tough job could be doable for the biggest Chinese portal sites, such as *Sina* (新浪), *Sohu* (搜狐) as well as *NetEase* (网易). Among them, *Sina Microblog service* (新浪微博, *Sina Weibo* <http://t.sina.com.cn/>) emerged ahead of all the other components in September 2009. Since then, *weibo* (microblog, 微博), as a kind of new social network system seemingly has created more possibilities for Chinese netizens, especially when it comes to participating online social-political discussions and expressing personal political views.

## 1. Comparison between the Chinese *weibo* and *Twitter*

### (1) What is *Twitter*?

*Twitter* is the first and for now the most popular online microblog service around the world. According to *CompetePulse* (2010), *Twitter* has a quite large member base, consisting of 25,677,370 unique visitors in Jan, 2010. Under its social network, each user has a group of “followers”, who could receive and read this user's *Twitter* messages (known as *tweets*) and periodic status updates. The tweets have maximum 140 characters that tell the user's recent personal information and life updates. In this dynamic *Twitter* community, everyone can register and obtain an account. They can follow whoever they want. To reply and comment on one user's tweet is totally free and convenient. Lots of stars and celebrities choose *Twitter* to launch free but widespread media promotions. Besides, more and more government leaders become users of *Twitter* too, such as the American President Barack Obama and the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. Despite of such a global popularity, “decentralization (去中心化, *qu zhongxin hua*)” remains a special feature of *Twitter*. Specifically, *Twitter* prefers to let famous people register forwardly and voluntarily. It would not recommend any “*Twitter* star” to other common *twitterers* (*Southern Metropolis Weekly*, 2010: 20, in Chinese). In general, *Twitter* is considered as an open, independent and impartial communication utility. Jack Dorsey (the founder of *Twitter*) explains that: “*Twitter* is founded around the principles of *immediacy* and *transparency*. It allows users to create a shared experience among users around the world and create more empathy”

(ReadWriteWeb, 2010).

Moreover, according to one interesting study by Asur and Huberman (2010), it seems that *Twitter* has the ability to help people with forecasting future outcomes. Although they only worked on the task of predicting box-office revenues for movies, they still concluded optimistically that their method could be extended to a large variety of topics. *Twitter* seemingly could help to predict market potential of a product and the result of an election as well. At a deeper level, Asur and Huberman (2010) trust this social medium to express a “collective wisdom”, which can “yield an extremely powerful and accurate indicator of future outcomes”. Of course, since *Twitter* is largely consumed by relatively young and educated middle-class people, its potential in assessing the future outcomes on a broader perspective needs more considerations and observations.

In addition, as a powerful mobilizing vehicle for massive political demonstration, *Twitter* has showed enormous impact in different countries, such as *the 2004 Orange Revolution* in Ukraine (Glodstein, 2007), *the 2008 “networked protests”* in Greece (*OpenDemocracy*, 2008; *GlobalVoices*, 2008) as well as the most recent *2011 Jasmine Revolutions* in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. The possibilities of SNS-based revolution have become a hot topic in these years. Although some cyber-utopian assumptions – which trust social media can alone save people from political control – have been criticized (*BostonReview*, 2009; Morozov, 2011), *Twitter* and other SNSes' unique role as a pro-democratic communication weapon is undeniable.

Lastly, in China, *Twitter* has been prohibited since June 2009. Majority of Chinese netizens have no tool to access it any more. However, via virtual private network (VPN) and proxy servers on PC, or via Java-enabled application platform on mobile (such as *Snaptu* software), *Twitter* is still accessible for some of the netizens.

## (2) The Chinese microblog services: *weibo*

In the Whiter Paper of China's *Weibo* Market in First Year (2010, in Chinese, “中国微博元年市场白皮书 *Zhongguo Weibo Yuannian Shichang Baipishu*”) made by *Sina* in Sep 2010, there have been 10 main microblog providers in mainland China. Four of them are operated by China's four biggest portal sites: *Sina*, *Sohu*, *NetEase* and *Tencent* (腾讯). The others are *Baidu i 贴吧* (<http://tieba.baidu.com/>), *zuosha* (做啥, <http://zuosa.com/>), *digu* (嘀咕, <http://digu.com/>), *tongxuewang* (<http://tongxue.com/>), *9911 微博客* (<http://www.9911.com/>), and *Follow5* (<http://www.follow5.com/>). Then, with the return of *Fanfou* in Nov 2010, there are 11 microblog

services in total until the beginning of 2011. Compared with *Twitter*, these Chinese weibo services have several unique features.

Firstly, compared with the 140 English characters written on *Twitter*, 140 Chinese characters are able to tell more details and give a better explanation about a same matter. In this way, this word limitation seemingly does not make a big problem for Chinese users. In a way, it is a relatively good requirement for the users to tell the story succinctly.

Secondly, due to China's controlled media environment, *weibo* is more considered as a freer channel for people to communicate online. It works as a medium that gives the Chinese political activists more space for political argument and expression. As a Chinese expert points out:

“因为中国这个特殊的背景，微博做为媒体工具的价值被突出了。中国如果变成美国了，从媒体属性上来讲，微博就没有太高的价值 (With China's specific socio-political environment, *weibo*'s role as a vehicle of communication more stand out. If China was America, the value of *weibo* would be less when it is simply viewed with its attribute as a media tool) (*Southern Metropolis Weekly*, 2010: 25, my translation from the Chinese).” Consequently, it is hard for some foreigners to understand why the Chinese people are seemingly fonder of talking about political issues on *twitter*-style tools.

According to an article on *the Southern Metropolis Weekly* (2010: 34, in Chinese), even Jack Dorsey (the founder of *Twitter*) did not realize how seriously Ai Weiwei (a Chinese artist, who is active in social, cultural and political criticism; his *Twitter* account: <http://twitter.com/#!/aiww>) and other Chinese activists viewed *Twitter*-like service as a very useful channel for online political discussion and participation.<sup>(10)</sup>

Thirdly, unlike these political activists and social critics, the majority of common Chinese netizens use *weibo* simply as an easy-going communication tool in daily life. They use *weibo* to update personal news, to forward jokes, and to share songs with followers. This situation becomes the third feature of China's *weibo*: being tightly combined with popular entertainment. The concept of “amusing ourselves to death (娱乐至死, *yule zhisi*)” was created by the American media theorist Neil Postman, who fears that people will be ruined by the pleasure and entertainment created by media technologies. In Postman's (1985) opinion, people are losing capacities to think under the influence of apolitical pop culture.

“Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice. The result is that we are a

people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death.”

To a certain degree, *weibo* is amusing the Chinese users as well, especially to the youth. As one Chinese expert notes, nearly 80% of the domestic *weibo* users choose it for entertainment, while only 30% of foreign *twitterers* do so (*Southern Metropolis Weekly*, 2010: 24, in Chinese). Take *Sina Weibo* as an example, to invite celebrities and open a specifically verified account for them is one of *Sina*'s biggest strategies. “主打明星牌 (celebrities-centered tactic: *zhuda mingxing pai*)” has become a crucial factor for *Sina*, and it really helps to enhance both *Sina* and the stars' popularity and reputation. According to the Whiter Paper of China's *Weibo* Market in First Year (2010, in Chinese), there have been more than 20,000 celebrities using *Sina Weibo*. Among the list of Top 10 most followed, almost all of them are pop stars.<sup>(11)</sup> While the *Twitter* is trying best to lower superstar's level and to treat everyone equally, the Chinese *weibo* providers are working on shaping the majority into fans of different idols. It seems that *weibo* gives access for common people to speak up. But, speaking up does not mean the public voices can be fairly heard and valued. To a certain degree, the common *weibo* users are still disrespected, exactly as what happens to them offline. “We still have nothing online (在网上我们依然一无所有, *zai wangshang women yiran yiwu suoyou*)” is sad, but it is true for most of the ordinary users.<sup>(12)</sup> In contrast, as the earliest and the most alike copy of *Twitter* in China, *Fanfou* is closer to *Twitter* on this point. In Wang Xing's opinion, *Fanfou* respects their customers more than *Sina Weibo* does (*Southern Metropolis Weekly*, 2010: 28, in Chinese). As a result, rather than well-known pop stars on *Sina*, the most followed people on *Fanfou* are mostly public intellectuals, writers, freelancers, independent bloggers as well as critics, such as 连岳 (*Lian Yue*: <http://fanfou.com/lianyue>) and 和菜头 (*Hecaitou*: <http://fanfou.com/和菜头>).

Fourthly, the dissidents' status on *weibo* is very complicated in China. For instance, Ai Weiwei (before being arrested) was using his second *Sina Weibo* account, since his first one got shut down after he posted his investigation results about the 5.12 Wenchuan Earthquake (汶川地震, 12 May 2008). More interestingly, his current account was under the name of 艾未来 (*Ai Weilai*), rather than 艾未未 (*Ai Weiwei*). Technologically, it was a wise way to avoid the censors' track of his name (as a sensitive word). However, it was indeed a compromise that he had to make in order to use the *weibo* service. Even so, if someone searched his account by using “艾未来” on *Sina Weibo*, his account was not in the results. In other words, only if the fans had a direct link to Ai's account in advance, would it be possible for them to follow him; otherwise not. Compared with other top-followed celebrities, his followers were really few. But now, after he was arrested on 3 April 2011, his second account was not terminated but changed into “艾未了 (*Ai Weiliao*)”, seemingly being used by another

person. Of course, Ai is only one case of China's political activists on *weibo*. However, his *weibo* account's situation gives some impressions of Chinese dissidents' predicament and their complex online status. Anyhow, on China's *weibo*, the influence and popularity of political activists and public intellectuals are much less than the pop stars. Making *weibo* apolitical is a significant market strategy for the operators. It is also the best way for the state to keep control.

Lastly, it is the censorship on political sensitive content that needs to be mentioned. As all the other kinds of media, the Chinese microblogs can not be immune to strict governmental control and regulations. The *weibo* operators need to track each post and to make sure none of them comprises any improper content. They also need to get the unwanted information and pictures deleted within a shortest period of time. So, when it comes to having a sufficient ability of self-censorship, the big domestic portal sites have no doubt more advantages. This could partly be a reason to explain why *Sina* could launch *weibo* service only 2 months after *Fanfou* was closed down. From the state's point of view, *Fanfou*'s shutdown is not because of their *weibo* service. In fact, it is more associated with who are running the service and how they are running it. Using a vivid metaphor from *Sohu*'s chief editor, the *weibo* created by independent teams should be viewed as a creative but unstable young man, while the *weibo* operated by national portal sites are considered a mature, well-disciplined man. If China's rulers have to choose who can engage in *weibo* service, the rulers will undoubtedly choose the man with more advantages in capital, technology and management (*Southern Metropolis Weekly*, 2010: 23, in Chinese). Clearly, they are more reliable and cooperative, in the eyes of the rulers.

To sum up, the *weibo* services are quite unique and important for content sharing and political participation within China's online civic community. Despite the entertainment feature, the online predicament for political activists and the compulsory censorship, *weibo* is hoped to set agendas in news topics and to make changes in the public discourse. Especially when *Twitter* is banned and the active Chinese *twitterers* have almost no influence inside of the mainland China, *weibo*'s role as a channel for online political debates and activism is more outstanding. The next segment will then analyze *weibo*'s democratic power during 2010 one year.

## 2. The democratic power coming from *weibo*

Although the *Sina Weibo* has only been launched in mainland China for more than one year, together with the other *weibo* websites, this kind of microblog services have showed big democratic power on many socio-political incidents. In fact, among all the 119 representative news summarized

in the 2010 Bluebook of Law (“2010 法治蓝皮书, 2010 *Fazhi Lanpishu*”), more than 60% of the cases either got first discovered from the reporting of *weibo* or got wider attention after *weibo*'s dissemination (*Sina*, 2011, in Chinese). Besides, nearly 94% *weibo* users agree *weibo* has changed their life, and 73% trust *weibo* as a main source for news and information (*TimeWeekly*, 2010, in Chinese). The following paragraphs will give several examples to show how *weibo* improved China's Net-based political activities.

Firstly, *weibo* can help to connect the netizens and the media professionals. By using mobile phone and the 3G services, it comes possible for a common person to play the role as a breaking news discoverer. It means, when a newsworthy event is taking place without the presence of a professional journalist, a common person is also able to record the whole cause with a personal mobile phone. Then, this witness can upload this piece of news online through *weibo* service without delay. So, *weibo*'s immediacy ensures the news gets publicized at the first moment when it happens. In this sense, China has somehow entered a “pan-national media age (全民媒体时代, *quanmin meiti shidai*)”. The symbol of this age is the wide utilization of *weibo* and other new media in sharing social events with other netizens.<sup>(13)</sup> Besides, since it is not necessary to register a *weibo* account under a real name, the identity of the news reporter gets protected to a certain degree. After the information or pictures are posted online, everyone can access it freely, including the media staff that is looking for news topics. In this way, *weibo* works as a bridge between the common people and the media, especially the traditional media. Through this *weibo*-mediated communication, the common citizens begin to take the responsibility for exposing social problems, while the media professionals work on exploring the hidden truth behind the scene. In other words, after the ordinary witness and participator have revealed “what happened” on the spot, the traditional well-educated reporters begin to concentrate more on “why it happened” and how to produce investigative reports. As Dewey has argued that, public's fullest potential gets exploited through keeping in touch with the press. So, *weibo* may be in favor of improving democracy in this sense. In reality, when scholars confirm *weibo*'s impact on this subject, they also stress the traditional media's role simultaneously. For instance, Fan Yijin (范以锦, former director of *Nanfang Daily*) hopes to “more widely open the traditional media (my translation from the Chinese “将传统媒体放开一些”).” Also, Huang Yasheng (黄亚生, professor of MIT Sloan School of Management in Chinese Economy and Business) asks for “more information given to the 'insiders' of the media system (my translation from the Chinese “使体制内部的人掌握更多的信息”).” Lastly, Fang Zhouzi argues that: “*weibo* can supplement but not totally substitute the traditional media (my

translation from the Chinese “微博可以作为传统媒体的补充, 但不可能完全取代传统媒体”) (TimeWeekly, 2010b).”

Secondly, *weibo* creates a good online environment for the netizens to get together and to agglomerate into larger political forces. Many Chinese users think that using *weibo* is a kind of “宅运动 (*zhai yundong*, home activity)”. It means that, even being at home or indoors, people still get opportunities to engage in social issues. Besides, a simple “re-tweet” can symbolize the user's attitude as well, even if there are no comments along with the message forwarding and sharing (分享即表态, *fenxiang ji biaotai*, to share means to take a stand). At the same time, the Chinese users pay attention to the power of onlookers. “To surround and watch, or *weiguan* (围观, in Chinese)” becomes one of the most popular buzzword for *weibo*. There is even a newly invented English word “*circusee*”, specifically expressing the meaning of “to get together and watch”. It is the synthesis of “circus” and “see”, just like a circus performance which is worth watching (*ChinaWhisper*, 2010). “围观改变中国 (*weiguan gaibian Zhongguo*, to get together and watch can change China)”, “围观即参与 (*weiguan ji canyu*, to get together and watch means participation)” and “关注即力量 (*guanzhu ji liliang*, attention gives power)” are all good examples showing *weibo*'s power in concentrating the forces of the ordinary people. Generally thinking, the more people focus on a specific event, the better and quicker it could be dealt with. Hence, some of the Chinese *weibo* users believe that *weibo* has an inherent “微动力 (*wei dongli*, micro-impetus)”. It converges the common citizens' individual concern and attention into a more collective opinion and motivation. On this point, *weibo* satisfies Dewey's requirement for generating the public opinion: the public's fundamental character should derive from its social existence. Flexible and full connection between the publics is extremely significant for the generation of public opinion and political democracy.

Thirdly, apart from organizing the publics, *weibo* also has a magnificent effect on connecting different social classes and attracting public attention and support. For instance, Yu Jianrong (于建嵘, <http://t.sina.com.cn/yujianrong>, a fieldworker in rural conflicts and mass disturbances in China) concerns *weibo* as a “personal Xinhua Agency (个人的新华社, *geren de Xinhuashe*)”. He allows all print media to quote his messages on his *weibo*. In his point of view, the exploration and dissemination of *weibo* tweets will result in kind of “微革命 (*wei geming*, micro-revolution)”, which will eventually make the state attach bigger importance to the public opinion (*ChinaDaily*, 2010, in Chinese). Moreover, another interesting instance happened when China's President Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) opened his *weibo* account on *RenMinWang* (人民网, <http://www.people.com.cn/>) on



February 21st, 2010. Within one day, although there was no single post on his page, the number of his followers has reached to 14,000. In the end, for the sake of a normal operation of the server, the website had to shut Hu's account down (*ChinaDaily*, 2010, in Chinese). To a certain degree, this incident apparently tells how eagerly the common Chinese citizens are looking forwards to communicating with the top leaders. Of course, the dream of communicating local grievances directly to central governmental ministries or rulers has been pursued ever since China's old days. But, nowadays, with the help of *weibo*, such a dream may become more realistic.

Fourthly, *weibo* has exerted tremendous impact in many socio-political events. For example, *the 2010 self-immolation protest* due to a forced demolition in *Yihuang* (宜黄) county (in Jiangxi province) shows how online public opinion changed the cause of an incident. On September 10, in order to make room for new local construction, a group of police officers and demolition crew came to the Zhong (钟) family and carried out the forced demolition of Zhong's home. To protest against this demolition, three family members set themselves aflame and jumped off the roof of their house. Eventually, one of them was declared dead at the hospital on September 18. After *the Southern Metropolis Daily's* (南方都市报, *Nanfang Dushibao*) first disclosure on September 12, this gruesome event quickly received intensive attention on both offline and online media. While the Propaganda Department and web-censors were consequently trying to make online deletions and suppressions on one side, *weibo's* immediacy brought a crucial turn for this incident on the other side. Particularly, when two younger members of Zhong family were on their way for a petition visit to Beijing on September 16, they were chased by the police and local government officials in Nanchang Airport. They had no choice but to lock themselves in the lavatory and send out mobile short messages to journalists. Then, many blogging journalists, such as Dengfei (邓飞, director of reporter department in *Phoenix Weekly*), began to live cast the events on his *Sina* and *Tencent Weibo*. Although most of the original text messages on *weibo* were deleted within a short period of time, people could still manage to spread a number of messages and photos on the Internet (*GlobalVoices*, 2010). In this battle for public opinion, *weibo* apparently played as a powerful communication weapon for the Zhong family, the journalists and the people who were deeply concerned about it. Through *weibo*, people sent messages to show their best wishes and support. They expressed their condemnation of the inhuman local authorities and the brutality of forced demolition. This online public opinion created huge pressure on the government. In the end, certain officials were sacked. It also broke the myth of the officials' impunity since the case of *Jiahe* demolition in 2004 (*NewWeekly*, 2010, in Chinese). Consequently, *Yihuang self-immolation incident* was considered as a milestone of "version 2.0 citizen weiguan" (2.0版公民围观的里程碑, 2.0 ban

*gongmin weiguan de yige lichengbei*) (Sina, 2010, in Chinese).

For another example, *the 2010 Shanghai fire* presents *weibo*'s incomparable advantage over traditional print media on breaking news. It also indicates *weibo*'s potential in mobilizing the publics in social activities. In fact, as early as the *Wenchuan Earthquake*, the *Twitter* has displayed its unique feature of immediacy. When the earthquake happened at 14:28 on 12<sup>nd</sup> May 2008, the very first report was shown on *Twitter* at 14:35. It was quicker than the *Bloomberg News* and the *Reuters* (Sina, 2008, in Chinese). The same situation occurred in *the 2010 Shanghai fire*. The earliest message was sent out by a Shanghainese only 5 minutes after the breakout of the fire. It was almost 10 minutes earlier than the first reporting from a mainstream medium, *XinMinWang* (新民网) (*RenMinWang*, 2011, in Chinese). Lots of messages and photos were quickly uploaded throughout *weibo*. It became national news within a short period of time. In a way, *weibo* played the role as a magnifier of the fire scene. It clearly showed the fierceness of the fire and the helplessness of the victims, which made the public begin to complain the government's dereliction of duty in terms of protecting the people's life and safety. So then, *weibo* turned into a platform for citizens to express their sympathies and emotions. Being mobilized and inspired by proposals on *weibo* and other social network sites, more than 100,000 citizens went to the fire scene and presented a huge amount of chrysanthemums to the fire victims on 21<sup>st</sup> November 2010. As one reporter comments, this actually became an “unsocial” social activity (非社会的社会活动, *feishehui de shehui huodong*) (*Southern Metropolis Weekly*, 2010-2: 26, in Chinese). “献花行动 (*xianhua xingdong*, movement of presenting the flowers)” proceeded in a peaceful, rational and solemn form, though this movement had no specific organizers, no clear political demands either. Some participants held the sign of “人在做, 天在看 (*ren zai zuo, tian zai kan*, People are doing, while the God is watching.)”, and the Shanghai City Symphony Orchestra elegantly performed Mozart's Ave Maria on the spot. In a way, Shanghai people's silent but powerful behavior resulted in a sensational case of China's civic activity. To a certain degree, with the help of the Internet and *weibo*, a re-born citizen spirit (市民精神, *shimin jingshen*) was growing up in Shanghai and throughout the whole country (*Southern Metropolis Weekly* 2010—2, in Chinese).

All in all, *weibo* has presented a certain degree of democratic power in making political changes in China. The *weibo*-centered communications create more interactions between the media and the publics. Besides, under the idea of “to get together and watch can change China”, *weibo* links different groups of people from the publics. It may also make the dream of communicating individual grievances directly to the central government more wishful. Finally, in the cases of *the*

2010 Yihuang self-immolation protest and the 2010 Shanghai fire, *weibo* also has produced a strong impact in real social events. With the unique features of immediacy and transparency, *weibo* did not only publicize breaking news as the first media platform, but also affected the incident course and mobilized the publics in social activities. To a large degree, *weibo* has become an effective vehicle for public debating, critical thinking and political participation. In this sense, *weibo* is very meaningful for the generation and expression of public opinion in China. But, since there are also deficiencies on this *weibo* platform, doubts about its political potential exist at the same time. In next segment, *weibo*'s three shortcomings will be discussed: the entertainment feature, the gap between China's elite and the common people, as well as the apathy coming from the bystander effect.

### 3. Skepticism about *weibo*'s democratic power in China

#### (1) The entertainment feature of *weibo*

A survey of the Internet usage and impact in five Chinese cities tells that, rather than being an information highway, the Internet in China might be more like an entertainment highway (Guo et al. 2005, IV). According to this survey, people trust the traditional media more than the Internet; and they trust domestic sources of news and information more than the information found on foreign news websites (Guo et al. 2005: 66-67). In this sense, the domestic traditional media, especially the Chinese televisions, still gain more trust than the Internet does. People prefer TV instead of the Internet for “hard” news. Moreover, according to a study conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in 2005, majority of Chinese Internet users seek out entertainment online, not “hard” news or serious political debates. Also, in the semiannual survey conducted by China Internet Network Information Center on July 2010 (CNNIC, 2010, in Chinese), it claims that “使用率 (*shi yong lv*)” of online music is higher than the usage of netnews (82.5% vs.78.5%).

Then, when it comes to this entertainment feature online, as earlier mentioned, *weibo* is also more associated with amusement than political discussions for majority of the *weibo* users. For instance, the Whiter Paper of China's *Weibo* Market in First Year (2010, in Chinese: 14) from *Sina* tells that, their users who have academic background lower than high school degree, mostly follow pop stars. Particularly for younger generation born after the 1990s, their *weibo* posts mainly refer to personal issues and gossip about celebrities. In fact, these young netizens, younger than 25 years old, have already taken up 50% of the whole Chinese Internet users until July, 2010 (CNNIC, 2010: 24, in Chinese). Seemingly, Chinese netizens do not want to spend much time on hard news, including on *weibo*. In a way, this is a factor that may reduce *weibo*'s democratic potential. There are three

perspectives to explain why majority of the Chinese *weibo* users express less enthusiasm on political content on *weibo*.

First of all, due to a tremendous pressure on the youth, especially on the university students and graduates, to deal with the problems of survival is much more pressing than to concern oneself with the political hard news. When Long Yingtai (龙应台, a Taiwanese cultural critic writing on the issues of politics and democracy) criticizes Taiwan's university students, she writes:

“大学四年之中，只有两件值得关心的事：一是把朋友交好，以后有结婚的对象；二是把功课读好，将来有满意的出路。对社会的关心，对是非的判断能力，择善固执的勇气，都不在大学的围墙以内 (There are only two things the university students care about: the first is to seek a partner for marriage; the second is to get good marks for future career. Inside of the university, students lack concerns about society, the sense of sound judgment between right and wrong, as well as the encouragement to choose good) (龙应台, 2010: 107, my translation from the Chinese).”

The youth in mainland China has similar considerations today. After overloaded studying and working, there is no much time left for them to worry about social issues. To earn one's living has already taken up most of the time. As a result, to find something amusing and relaxing online is the best thing people could choose in spare time. Most of the netizens do not treat the online information very seriously. So, few netizens have enough time and energy to ask if the information on *weibo* is correct before re-tweeting it to others. As long as the piece of information is interesting and eye-catching, it may easily get shared on a large scale. On this point, it is not hard to understand why a fake message of Jin Yong's (金庸, one of China's most respectable martial arts novelists) death could be quickly disseminated during one night. It is not hard to understand why the exaggerated and ridiculous story of *Xiao Yueyue* (小月月) became extremely famous online either. *Xiao Yueyue* is actually a made-up character first appeared on *Tian Ya* (天涯). She is a very stupefying woman, who is unbelievable, shocking, outrageous and even obnoxious. But, this kind of characteristics made her story extremely popular among the netizens. Since she got so extraordinary attention from the Chinese netizens, there was even an organization of “Worship Yue God Religion (拜月神教, *bai yue shen jiao*)” in the end. To a certain degree, the popularity of *Xiao Yueyue* exactly proves how low-brow the Chinese Internet content can be. It also shows how a made-up entertaining story can easily get spread by the netizens, who enjoy “amusing to death”.

Secondly, the difficulties and the quit of using proxy servers affect Chinese netizens' activities. According to Chinese Academy of Social Science's (CASS) research in 2000, only 10% of Internet

users admitted to regularly use proxy servers to circumvent censorship at that time (Guo and Bu, 2001, cited from MacKinnon, 2008: 33). Then, in 2005, the number for “frequent users of proxy servers” only amounted to 0.6%, while 71.2% netizens responded “never” (Guo et al. 2005). With respect to the university students, the situation is not much better. According to MacKinnon (2008: 33), although the students are aware of proxy servers and know how to use them to access blocked websites, the percentage of people choosing proxy servers is relatively small. Majority of them don't bother to resort to proxy, instead, they simply view the major domestic websites inside China. In a way, these studies indicate that, either the netizens do not know how to use proxy servers, or the netizens know the methods but have no interest to use proxy servers for alternative information. But, anyhow, both situations may affect the netizens' activities in accessing more serious news. Especially, when both the state and the website operators choose to keep *weibo* as apolitical as possible, the netizens are more likely to have entertaining news than “hard” news online.

Further, in terms of using proxy servers and other platforms to clime over China's Great Firewall, the divided results bring two distinct types of Chinese netizens: the ones who can “climb over the wall (翻墙, *fanqiang*)”, and the others who cannot. Their behaviors on microblogs are different accordingly. For instance, on *Twitter*, the Chinese *twitterers* are completely free to discuss issues concerning domestic democracy and human rights abuse. They do not need to care about using forbidden words and “*min gan ci* (敏感词, sensitive words)”. But, inside of the firewall, there are fewer serious discussions about political problems but more jokes and funny pictures on *Sina Weibo*. At times, some of the active critics are about to discuss a political sensitive topic, but their posts will be deleted quite soon. The only way to avoid a forced deletion is to express the meaning in a more subtle and tortuous way. For example, people could use *pinyin* (拼音) and homonyms instead of the right Chinese characters. In this way, it becomes harder for the operators to track forbidden words. In general, compared with *Twitter* and other websites outside of the Great Firewall, China's *weibo* are more conformist, obedient and self-disciplined. The primary role of *weibo* is more connected with facilitating modest online discussion than mobilizing offline action. At the same time, despite of non-stop complains about censorship from Chinese bloggers, it seems that no Chinese blog-hosting operator would take the risk to negotiate with authorities and to resist censorship requirements. Gradually, censorship turns into an imperative part of the game rules in China's Internet field. The Chinese bloggers and the commercial business all have to view censorship as a necessary tradeoff needed for the realization of online communication (MacKinnon, 2008: 42).

Thirdly, it is about the ways how the government and commercial corporations deal with the absence of famous international online services in China. Because of the harsh censorship, *Youtube*, *Twitter* and *Facebook* are all blocked. However, it does not mean that this kind of social network systems cannot be offered to Chinese netizens. Similarly as the case of *Fanfou* and *Sina Weibo*, the state will allow a more reliable firm to run such SNS business. So normally, it is a partner-like Chinese corporation copying the Western website and occupying the market. As a result, this Chinese version is almost as the same as the original one. But, since it is operated by a Chinese company, it is easier for the state to control. The routine and efficient self-censorship is a necessary premise for the corporations to have normal operation. The state seemingly does not concern itself with the companies' ways of “managing” user content as long as the content does not threaten the political stability. In this way, although most of the Chinese netizens cannot get fun directly from *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Youtube*, the government allows the operation of *Renrenwang* (人人网, [www.renren.com](http://www.renren.com)), *Sina Weibo* and *Youku* (优酷, [www.youku.com](http://www.youku.com)) as respective substitute. As MacKinnon (2008: 33) argues, from the earlier forums, chat rooms and blogs, until today's microblogs, these Chinese copies all serve as a “safety valve” by “allowing enough room for a wide range of subjects that people can let off steam about government corruption or incompetence, thus giving people more things to do with their frustrations before considering taking their gripes to the streets”. In other words, these made-in-China services offer a satisfactory option to the majority of the netizens. Meanwhile, by sticking to “amusing the users”, they ensure a “harmonious” social environment required by the state.

In all, *weibo*'s entertainment feature is a combination of the netizens' choice, the website operators' market strategy as well as the state's policy for political stability. In this sense, although the amusement challenges the political power of *weibo*, this is a feature which is not easy to change.

## (2) The gap between the elite and the common people

When Julian Assange (the creator of *Wikileaks*) explains the role of his staff and social networks in new era, he says that *wikileaks*' works are done under the collaboration between their staff, professional journalists and human-rights activists. But it is NOT done by the broader community. Further, he believes that the social networks “come in *only* after 'a story becomes a story,' becoming then 'an amplifier of what we (the *Wikileaks*) are doing' and 'a supply of sources' (*TimeOnline*, 2010).” In this sense, *weibo* in China should also play as “a sources supply” and “an amplifier” for the news. Meanwhile, it is the media professionals and activists taking care of the analytical and investigative reports. In a word, co-operations between the common people and the well-educated

elite are necessary for *weibo*'s engagement in the rational-critical discourse on political issues.

However, in practice, this assumption may encounter difficulties due to a gap between these two groups of people in China. The society seemingly has a crisis of mutual trust and reliability, not only between the Communist Party and the ruled, but also between the better-off middle class and the marginalized underclass. Of course, in *the 2010 Yihuang self-immolation protest*, *weibo* has somehow well connected the powerless Zhong family and many blogging journalists. But, sometimes, the have-nots just easily tend to doubt and distrust the haves.

For example, the mysterious death of Qian Yunhui (钱云会) on 2010 Christmas Day in *Yueqing* (乐清, a city in Zhejiang Province) is a case in point.<sup>(14)</sup> Not long after the photo of Qian's death was presented and tweeted on *weibo*, it ignited huge fury in China. Because the photo was really shocking and ghastly, almost everyone who has seen it was eager to know the real cause of his death. Although the government press conference declared that Qian died in an ordinary traffic accident, many Chinese people were suspicious of this official conclusion. They believed Qian was murdered because of his long history of petitions against alleged land abuses. So, in order to find the truth, there have been three different independent groups of volunteers going to *Yueqing* and doing investigative research after the accident. In general, these three groups were made up of journalists, scholars, public intellectuals, freelancers as well as online activists (*Southern Metropolis Weekly*, 2011, in Chinese). In the end, their investigation results were not unified. Some of them agreed with the police claim that Qian died of a car accident, while the others remained skeptical about this conclusion. Because nobody had a hard evidence to prove, none of these groups could obtain a 100% trust from the netizens. Actually, when this accident broke out, the netizens hoped there could be some independent civic organizations getting engaged in the investigation. Seemingly they trusted these experts and academic elite more than the officials. However, finally, the people seemingly did not fully trust these elite groups either. To a certain degree, "Qian was murdered" is the only acceptable and wanted conclusion by many Chinese people. It has got nothing to do with how well-educated and experienced the group members are. Instead, to suspect whatever the government says has become the response of many citizens' subconscious mind. So, if the respectable opinion leader's view conforms to the government's announcement, even if the view is true, the opinion leader would receive doubts and abuses from his followers anyhow. For instance, Xu Zhiyong (许志永, 2011, in Chinese)'s investigative report on the death of Qian Yunhui has already attracted attention and drawn on the public to question. Xu is a famous human rights activist in China. He is also one of the three law scholars who wrote the statement in favor of

the abolishment of detention law in Sun Zhigang's case (together with Yu Jiang 俞江 and Teng Biao 滕彪). After personally going to the crime scene together with his colleague of Open Constitution Initiative (公盟, *Gong Meng*), Xu drew conclusion that Qian died in a traffic accident. Undoubtedly, such a “surprising” report from Xu triggered many discussions and discontent. The netizens mostly regarded this report as cursory and unreliable. Moreover, there were even rumors about these intellectual group members receiving hush money (封口费, *fengkou fei*) from local government.<sup>(15)</sup>

Furthermore, this gap between the middle class and other common netizens may partly derive from different positions of these two classes in society. In fact, an income gap is getting huge between the urban and rural citizens. According to *ChinaDaily* (2010), by 2009, city dwellers' average incomes were 3.33 times greater than the average for farmers (17,175 yuan vs. 5,153 yuan). But, their income ratio was 2.56:1 in 1978 (343 yuan vs. 134 yuan). This is, in a way, continuing the traditional media's way of performance in Sun Zhigang's case. The media and the elite are in front of two reasons to help the poor people out: *the general public standpoint* and *the concern for the weaker social groups* (Li, 2008: 56). There is definitely an increasing tendency of the second reason during the last few years, especially during the *weibo* time. But, by and large, majority of *weibo* activists' primary consideration remains more inclined to the first reason. So to say, most of their engagements with the social issues end up with helping commoners and challenging the authority of the Party-state. They may rarely have an authentic “overleaping of own individuality (Smith, 1759: Pt.I, passim)”, which brings them true sympathy towards the poor people. As a result, even with the help of *weibo*, there is still “a hidden ignorance of a more structural critique of class conflict” (Li, 2008: 57). Anyhow, the educated urban citizens are the minority who have benefited more than any other segment of the Chinese population from the past 30 years of reforms. They have obtained much more control over their lives, and they are surely unwilling to sacrifice their economic gains in exchange for the riots and uncertain outcomes which a collapse of the CCP's political structure would bring (Tang, 2005). It must take an extremely profound and acute offline crisis for this group of elite to view it worth risking the online and offline privilege they have been enjoying (MacKinnon, 2008: 43). However, in reality, this “extremely profound and acute offline crisis” is very unlikely at this time in China.

In all, since there is an absence of full trust and interdependence between the better-off urban citizens and population from other segments, no thinker of pan-national popularity is able to take the responsibilities of online opinion leader under the current systems of controls. On the one side,



by linking different groups of people, *weibo* indeed emphasizes the public's fundamental character in social existence. On the other side, even with the help of *weibo*, to deal with the increasing class stratification and conflict will be more decisive for generating further political unification.

(3) The bystander effect (旁观者效应, *panguanzhe xiaoying*)

“To get together and watch (围观, *weiguan*)” is an important feature of *weibo*. In a common sense, the more people are watching a social issue, the more likely this issue is solved in a decent way. If a *weibo* post forwarder is viewed as an “online bystander”, the more forwarders focusing on one specific post, the more likely the problem in this post gets solved. However, because of the bystander effect, this result does not happen on all occasions. Further, the solution of a most focused issue may be even worse at times. In this sense, the bystander effect may decrease the power of “*weiguan* (To get together and watch)” on *weibo*.

On this subject, firstly, social psychologists Latane's and Darley's (1968, 1969) classical theories concerning bystander apathy need to be discussed. In their diverse experiments, bystanders in groups are obviously less likely to intervene in an emergency than if they are alone. It means, the greater the number of witnesses present, the less likely they are about to help a person in distress. There are basically two explanations. First, the apparent lack of concern on the part of others may lead each person to interpret the situation less seriously than he/she would otherwise. Second, the present of others may diffuse the responsibility for coping or not coping with the situation. Apart from the reaction of other bystanders, the relationships among them are seemingly important too. A stranger, who does not react, is the most inhibiting. Meanwhile, a neutral stranger is less inhibiting, and a friend is the least inhibiting. Therefore, “there is safety in numbers” which most person believe in, is pretty doubtful. As a matter of fact, its opposite seems to be true instead: the fewer people who are available to take action, the better. So, Adam Smith's idea about *sympathy* is correct that, it is possible for a man to be a “third person” or an “impartial observer” for somebody else in trouble. But, the bystander effect is actually challenging the impact of the “impartial *observer*”. Only to *observe* is far from enough for the real activism. In this sense, clicking the mouse does not mean a concrete help for the people living in poverty or under oppression. Moreover, *symbolic interactionism* tells that, public opinion occurs *only in large measure* through the *interaction* of groups (Blumer, 1969: 199-200). So, if every netizen is individually clicking the mouse at home, the amount of clicking may reach a large measure. But, since the individual clicking may have less real *interaction* between each other, it is still not easy for the scattered *weibo* users to organize themselves into an overwhelming force in the public opinion market.

With all these concerns, certain slogans on *weibo*, such as “围观改变中国 (to get together and watch can change China)”, “围观即参与 (to get together and watch means participation)”, “关注即力量 (attention gives power)” and “宅运动 (home activity)” are all questionable. Most of the *weibo* users are strangers in real life. It is easy for them to ignore others' consideration and concern. It is easy for them to fully rely on others' real action rather than thinking if there is anything they could personally help. It is also easy for them to put responsibility on others' shoulders without any hesitation and self-accusation. As a result, even if lots of persons care about one single *weibo* message, there is nobody “available to take action”. It seems like the emergency is being kicked around as a ball, but no one is about to pick it up and deal with it. Further, even if *weibo* successfully mobilizes the users to take part in a kind of offline social movement, since most of *weibo* users are strangers, there is no guarantee that they will not become the most inhibiting element to each other. In this sense, the netizen's role as bystander may damage the real impact of activists in practice.

On this point, Malcolm Gladwell (*TheNewYorker*, 2010) gives two explanations to answer “*why the revolution will not be tweeted*”: the lack of “strong ties” among the online activists as well as the absence of hierarchical “discipline and strategy”. In his opinion, the primary determinant of participation in an offline protest is supposed to be “critical friends”—the more friends you have who are critical of the regime the more likely you are to join the protest. “Activism that challenges the status quo—that attacks deeply rooted problems—is not for the faint of heart”. So, high-risk activism requires a “strong-tie” among protest participants. So to say, all of the participants must be highly committed and articulate supporters of a specific goal and value of a social movement. But, on social network sites, from *Facebook*, *Twitter* to *Sina Weibo*, the users have never met most of their friends or followers offline. They are not “critical friends” any more. These new social media cannot provide what social change always requires, so their weak ties built on the basis of microblogs will hardly result in a high-risk activism. On the surface, by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires, *weibo* and other social networks are seemingly effective at increasing participation. But, as a matter of fact, this kind of computer-mediated activism succeeds not by motivating people to take a real action. Instead, it succeeds by motivating people to do the things that they do when they are not motivated enough to take a real action. Consequently, the idea of “the social web is so sui generis that its essential difference alone will save those who use it from repression and tyranny” may not be true any more. As Evgeni Morozov (2011) argues in “*The Net Delusion*”, the concept of “cyber-utopianism” needs to be questioned. Indeed, rather than clicking a

button to “free” someone online, carrying out the training and strategy (on people, in other words) in specific social-political context is much more important for the longer-term activities (*ReadWriteWeb*, 2011).

Additionally, “the bystander apathy”, as one example of Chinese people's degraded collective mentality (国民劣根性, *guomin liegenxing*) has been noticed and criticized by some writers. Lu Xun (鲁迅, 1881-1936), Bo Yang (柏杨, 1920-2008) and Long Yingtai (龙应台, 1952- ) are outstanding figures among them. They have all noticed the indifference and coldheartedness of Chinese “看客 (*kanke*, onlooker or spectator)”.

For instance, after viewing healthy Chinese numbingly observing fellow citizens' death, Lu Xun abandoned medicine studies for literature. In preface to “*Call to Arms* (呐喊自序, *Nahan Zixu*)”, he writes:

“The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they may be, can only serve to be made examples of, or to witness such futile spectacles; and it doesn't really matter how many of them die of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit, and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to this end...”

Then, Bo Yang, the writer of “*The Ugly Chinaman* (丑陋的中国人)”, describes the indifference:

“每个人都全身远害，结果虽然并全不了身，远不了害……全世界哪个国家民族，有中国这么长久的内乱外患……但却养成了中华民族特有的淡漠和冷酷” (出自《邪说》)。(“Everybody hoped to escape from the danger and disaster. But, in the end, it was not possible to do so. In the world, besides China, was there any other nation that suffered such a long history of internal disorder and external invasion? However, through this experience, the people have got a collective indifference and coldness, which is embedded in the Chinese nation.” Cited from “*Xie Shuo: The heretical ideas*”, my translation from the Chinese).”(16)

Finally, criticism comes from Taiwanese public intellectual Long Yingtai and her essay collection “*The Wild Fire* (野火集, *Yehuo Ji*)”. In this book, she questioned the democratic problems in Taiwan in 1980s. But, many of the problems reflect similar questions in mainland China today. For instance, in “中国人，你为什么不出气 (*Chinese, why aren't you angry*)” and “台湾是谁的家 (*Taiwan is the home of who?*)”, Long expresses her discontent with the “silent majority”. She asks:

“你是谁？凭什么你做‘沉默的大众’，等少数人努力了……你再去享受他们的成果？……你在一旁观望？嘲笑？还是漠不关心？……

在台湾革新很难.....一个更大的障碍, 却是民众本身的缺乏动力.. (Who are you? How can you be one of the “silent majority”? After the minority of people has made efforts ..... will you then enjoy the fruits of their hard work? ..... Are you simply speculating and laughing around? Are you apathetic? ..... It was hard to have reform in Taiwan ..... an obstacle is the lack of initiatives from the publics.” (Long Yingtai, 2010, 130-131, my translation from the Chinese).”

Certainly, all these viewpoints do not necessarily mean bystander apathy is an unchanging national mentality in China. It is true that some tumultuous events in modern and contemporary China have made individuals feel unsafe to participate events outside of familial circle. The devastating experiences of *the Taiping Rebellion* and *the Boxer Rebellion* in the Late Qing time, and the insecurity during *the Xinhai Revolution* and *the Cultural Revolution*, all become reasons for the relative social passivity in China. Seemingly the Chinese focus more on family rather than “society”. But, different peoples display different socio-psychological features in different times. Depending on specific circumstances, these socio-psychological features will tend to alter correspondingly. There are no “hereditary” differences in the degree of social activism and participation between Chinese and non-Chinese. The bystander effect is just one of the preventing factors to the high-risk activism.

In all, there are three perspectives to view how bystander effect decreases the power of “*weiguan* (To get together and watch)” on *weibo*. Firstly, according to Latane's and Darley's social psychology, the fewer people who are available to take action, it may be the better. In this sense, even if a *weibo* post gets a large measure of sharing, the users can not necessarily create enough interactions in forming the public opinion. Sometimes, the large amount of sharing may even risk the activists' impact in practice. Secondly, according to Gladwell and Morozov, the idea of “cyber-utopianism” is questionable. In fact, the *weibo*-like SNSes are not good at creating “strong ties” and “hierarchical discipline and strategy” for high-risk activism. Thirdly, literature from three Chinese writers also express intellectual's concern about Chinese people's indifference in public affairs. Although there is no “hereditary” difference in the degree of social activism between Chinese and non-Chinese, certain historical experiences might have created a relative social passivity in China. Given the Chinese feel more secure in familial circle rather than in “society”, *weibo*'s impact in truly mobilizing the public receives a challenge.

#### 4. Conclusion for *weibo*'s democratic power

Since the *Sina Weibo* was launched in September 2009, together with other *weibo* websites, this

kind of microblog service has become very popular in mainland China. Only on *Sina*, 90,000,000 messages have been posted since it started to operate. On average, more than 3,000,000 posts are created every day. There are about 40 posts being presented in one second (The Whiter Paper of China's *Weibo* Market in First Year, 2010, in Chinese). Also, with the unique characteristics of *immediacy* and *transparency*, *weibo* has been showing huge democratic impact in various socio-political issues. But, since *weibo* still has shortcomings, there is skepticism about its political potential as well. In general, *weibo*'s democratic power is both noticeable and contentious.

On the one side, although *weibo* is tightly embedded with the amusement character and under the suppression of censorship, it has been well working as a good platform for the public to take part in online political discussions. Especially for China's political activists and dissidents, though they have more predicament and lower popularity than the pop stars, *weibo* has still offered them a relatively favorable channel to connect with a wider range of common people. In this sense, *weibo* may be outstanding in encouraging the practice of rational-critical discourse. Moreover, many media organizations and public groups have become *weibo* users. It is really helpful for creating communications between different segments of people in society. Only on *Sina Weibo*, 466 mainstream media have opened their accounts until Aug 2010. It includes 118 newspapers, 243 magazines, 36 TV stations and 69 radio stations. Meanwhile, there are also 41 governmental agencies. It predicts there will be 0.1 billion active *weibo* users by the middle of 2011 (The Whiter Paper of China's *Weibo* Market in First Year, 2010, in Chinese). Further, when looking at the social network sites as a whole, they are popular too. According to CNNIC (2010, in Chinese) semiannual survey report, there have been 0.12 billion Chinese users on SNSes until June 2010. Therefore, working hand in hand with other social network services, *weibo* has gradually brought China a “pan-national media age (全民媒体时代, *quanmin meiti shidai*)”. This *weibo*-mediated social relationship, with its “micro-impetus (微动力, *wei dongli*)”, may open a new era in which a kind of “micro-revolution (微革命, *wei geming*)” is taking place.

On the other side, there are also several barriers to *weibo*'s democratic impact. Firstly, *weibo*'s entertainment feature, as a compound result produced by the netizens, the commercial corporations and the state, depoliticizes the online information to a certain degree. As a result, it is in favor of the “harmonious” social environment required by the Communist Party. Secondly, even on *weibo*, there is a gap between the better-off urban citizens and population from other segments. As long as the “hidden ignorance of class stratification and conflict” continues to exist, it will be hard to realize a full interdependence in different groups of people. So, China has no public figure which can play

the role as an online opinion leader under the current situation. Thirdly, *weibo*'s slogan “to get together and watch can change China (围观改变中国, *weiguan gaibian Zhongguo*)” has also been challenged by the bystander effect. On the basis of Latane's and Darley's social psychology, the high amount of sharing of a specific *weibo* post does not necessarily result in a better and quicker resolution of the corresponding problem. So, rather than individually clicking the mouse at home, to create strong interactions and mutual trust in the public affair participators is more important. On this point, without mobilizing and training the scattered users into “critical friends”, *weibo*-like SNSes' democratic potential is still uncertain in the high-risk activities.

Finally, Hu Yong (胡泳, professor in School of journalism and communication, Beijing University) points out, an impressive “*weibo*-driven politics (微博政治, *weibo zhengzhi*)” has been created since *weibo* emerged in mainland China (Sina, 2010b, in Chinese). However, what is more important is to carry out further training on *people* in each of the contextualized political issue. When generalizing *Twitter*'s role, Jack Dorsey says: “*Twitter* is just a tool and that it can't change any governments itself, but that it is the *users* who can use it to change governments (*ReadWriteWeb*, 2010).” Besides, Ai Weiwei used to express that: “there is no other means to melt the glacier. It all depends on the Chinese *people*'s heat as a whole (my translation from the Chinese “融化冰川没有别的方法, 只有靠中国人的整体热量”).” In a way, both of them confirm the people's leading role in making political changes. Therefore, even in the microblog age, the fundamental question of political activism still aims at the “strong ties” and “hierarchical discipline and strategy” among the netizens. In order to create a SNS-based public sphere, the growth of the people's social existence and interdependence is very meaningful. In other words, China's educated middle class needs to recognize the “hidden ignorance of class stratification and conflict”. In the light of Habermasian description for “public sphere”, it is vital for the middle class to come together as a public on the Internet landscape. More importantly, as the bourgeois intellectuals did in the public sphere – they “claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves (Habermas, 1989, 27)” – the Chinese middle class also needs to play the leading role in political activities, which may even risk their own gains from the past 30 years of reforms. In a way, the democratic impact from the *weibo*-like new media has made this kind of transformation more realistic. But, due to certain barriers, this process is more likely to be incremental and subtle. So, the concept of “micro-revolution” is more presented as “an evolution,” rather than “a radical revolution”.

## **Chapter Four: The ICTs and their political impact in Japan and South Korea**

Besides China, the information and communication technologies (ICTs) have strong influence on other two East Asian countries as well: Japan and South Korea. Both governments have paid a great amount of attention to the innovation of the ICTs and Internet. So, they have had a rapid development since early 1990s. To a large degree, the ICTs and the Internet have become a crucial part of their societies (Fouser, 2001: 263). Therefore, although the market size in Japan and South Korea are incomparable with China in the numerical terms, they have no disadvantages in the cyber-world competition. In fact, around the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Japanese was the third most common language on Internet, after English and Spanish. Also, the Korean language was the third common language in Asian area, after Japanese and Chinese (*Courrier International*, 1998, cited from Fouser, 2001: 263). So, this chapter will make a comparison between China, Japan and South Korea. It will mainly look at the ICTs' and Internet's development as well as their political impact in Japan and South Korea. Then, three countries' similarities and differences in this aspect will be analyzed.

Especially, since the democracy has developed into different degrees in three countries, to contextualize the Internet-driven political activism becomes very meaningful. In general, Japan is more or less fully democratic society. For South Korea, since there are still some oppressive laws, the Korean society is not fully democratic, or is less democratic than Japan. For example, their National Security Law has become the one which needs abolishment or reform in the eyes of Amnesty International (Amnesty International, 2010). However, as South Korea does have multi-party elections, its democracy is greater than China. Given all that, how did the degree of democracy which they have obtained influence people's enthusiasm in new media-centered activism? Are the South Koreans still more enthusiastic about using the new media into political conflicts than the Japanese, as what happened in the 1990s? This is a question this chapter will try to answer.

### **Part One: Background introduction**

This part will give a general background introduction about the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in two countries. The following content covers: (1) when and how the government started to build the ICT structures; (2) what kind of outstanding features the ICTs' development has got; (3) what attitude the government has about the ICTs' political impact.

## 1. In Japan

### (1) The beginning of the ICTs' development

Compared with South Korea, the Internet got widespread a little later in Japan. But, since the government started to focus on building the ICT structure around late 1990s, the Internet and especially the mobile phone technologies have got a rapid development.

At the beginning, majority of the Japanese were not quite interested in the Internet. They simply used it for entertainment (Nakayama, 2005: 7). The Japanese PC networks were not connected to the Internet until early 1992, and the commercial use of the Internet actually began around 1995. To a certain degree, besides the slowness of word processing in Japanese, the high costs for accessing websites were another reason that hampered the Internet's entry. Due to a monopoly position of the Nippon Telephone and Telegraph (NTT), the Internet access via PC was dominated by dial-up connections, rather than digital subscriber line (DSL) for a long time (Ducke, 2007: 18). So, high local telephone fees might have weakened the Japanese people's enthusiasm in the Internet at that time.

Then, in 1998, Japan's first government policies for IT structure were created under Keizō Obuchi (小淵恵三) government. The first “Basic IT law” and a more concrete “e-Japan” plan followed in 2000 and 2002 respectively (*Mainichi Shinbun*, 2001; Jain 2002, cited from Ducke, 2007: 22). Especially, with the establishment of the IT Strategic Headquarters (高度情報通信ネットワーク社会推進戦略本部, It戦略本部 in Japanese) within the Cabinet on 6 January 2001, the government clearly aimed at forming an advanced information and telecommunications network society in Japan.<sup>(17)</sup> The headquarters announced “e-Japan Strategy” on 22 January 2001. According to this strategy, Japan hoped to realize the e-government by 2003; and e-commerce was estimated to exceed 70 trillion yen by 2003.<sup>(18)</sup> Also, the government noticed international collaborations with other regions. They started to reach various agreements with South Korea, China and European Union about mutual cooperation in new IT innovations (MOFA, 2001, Sōmushō 2003a, b; MOFA, 2004, cited from Ducke, 2007: 22). On the basis of these national strategies, the ICT innovation got promoted rapidly in Japan.

### (2) The outstanding features of the ICTs' development

The most outstanding feature of Japan's ICTs refers to the popularity of mobile phone and mobile Internet. The mobile phone, which is called *keitai denwa* (携帯電話) or *keitai* in Japanese, obtained an obvious prevalence in Japanese market from 1992 (Nakayama, 2005: 8). This high level of



popularity has led to a “mobile IT revolution”, which shaped Tokyo into a center for global mobile phone innovation (Hjorth, 2009: 14). Only in the Japan’s market, since the NNT DoCoMo (NTT ドコモ in Japanese. *NTT Docomo, Inc.* is the leading mobile phone operator in Japan. Its official name phrase is “*do* communications over the *mobile* network”. The word “DoCoMo” is an abbreviation of this phrase, which also means “everywhere” in Japanese) launched its i-mode (a mobile media, converging telephone and the Internet) in February 1999, the subscribers have increased from 5 million in 2000 to 41 million by the end of May 2004 (NTT DoCoMo, 2003, cited from Hjorth, 2009: 93; NTT DoCoMo, 2003b). Besides, by 2010, there have been 111 million mobile subscribers in Japan. About 62% of them have become mobile Internet users.<sup>(19)</sup> Meanwhile, the government is also committed to offering funding support to make Japan become the world leader in this technology (Nakayama, 2005: 12). Japan has actually achieved a model of “gross national cool (GNC)”. This model is presented in the form of a heavily orchestrated governmental and industry collaboration, which creates a type of cultural capital (soft power) within global markets (McGray, 2002, cited from Hjorth, 2009: 26). Under the impact of this model, Japan's mobile phone innovation is very remarkable. Also, the outstanding emergence of “*oya yubi sedai*” (thumb generation) results in a high penetration rate of mobile Internet, which becomes an extraordinary features of the Japanese Internet landscape (Plant, 2002, cited from Hjorth, 2009: 5; Ducke, 2007: 25). Finally, although Japan did not achieve the “double revolution” in communications – jumping from handwriting to the electronic keyboard without taking the intermediate step of typewriting – the younger generation of Japan somehow jumps from handwriting directly to the keypad (Nakayama, 2005).

### (3) The government's attitude about ICTs' political impact

When it comes to the use of ICTs into political issues, particularly in the election campaigns, the government's attitude is both scrupulous and open.

On the one side, at least until 2007, the government's initiatives mainly tended to obstruct the political use of new technologies rather than to encourage it (Ducke, 2007: 22). The Public Offices Election Law, enacted in 1925, is a good example. It has heavy restrictions on media usage in election campaigns. So, in principal, the government does not allow the candidates to use websites for election campaigns. But, in recent years, many parties and candidates have become more eager to embrace the ICTs for increasing their popularity. Their practices started with smaller parties either posting a blank website with a voice message or providing basic online information without updates (Freeman, 2003; Tkach-Kawasaki, 2003, 2004). Then, by late May 2010, the politicians in

both the ruling Democratic Party and the Liberal Democratic Party (the opposition party) had finally come up with a bill to amend the election law. Two camps reached an agreement on the use of websites and blogs during the campaign period. Now, it appears to be a matter of time before Japan sees candidates vying online for votes (*JapanToday*, 2010). In this sense, the government's attitude about the Internet's involvement in election campaigns is relatively open and democratic.

## 2. In South Korea

### (1) The beginning of the ICTs' development

The South Korean government's initiative in ICTs started earlier than Japan. It has made significant progress in ICT infrastructure and innovation in South Korea. It has also created the country into a leading player in many telecommunication sectors. Today, with the highest computer penetration rates and fastest speeds, South Korea is the most “broadbanded” country in the world (OECD, 2006, cited from Hjorth, 2009: 14).

To begin with, South Korea's “First Administrative Computerization Project”, which was led by the Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs, began in 1978.<sup>(20)</sup> Under this project, the government started to build an administration information system that covered the entire nation in a single information network.<sup>(21)</sup> Through this way, South Korea gradually entered its process of “technological modernization” and “informatization” in 1980s. For example, the government actively promoted the ICT education both in schools and to the public. They released the “Reinforcing Computer Education in Schools” in the mid 1980s. Also, they announced the “Support and Implementation Plan for Computer Education in the Schools” in the late 1980s. Both strategies nicely assisted the introduction of school computer education in the country (KERIS, 2000: 20). But, during the 1970s and 1980s, Korea paid more attention on producing and exporting their light and heavy industry products (e.g. shoes, consumer electronics and ships) than the knowledge-intensive items (Lee, 2003: 8). Then, after the economic crisis in 1997, the government re-examined its economic structure. In order to win the global competition, especially the one from China's cheap labor and improving product quality, Korea started to develop its “knowledge-based economy”. This strategy had a stronger techno-nationalistic discourse to inspire the ICTs (e.g. semiconductors and precision goods) (Lee, 2003: 8). For example, the government carried out “Fourth Telecommunication Business Structure Reform”, supporting the high-tech businesses with reduced tax (Stewart, 1996: 36). Also, the “Cyber Korea 21” plan in 1999 paved the way for Korea to become a “leading country of informatization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (MIC, 2002: 9). Finally, in 1999 and 2000, the Korean ICT industries increased 36% and 36.5% respectively (Lee, 2003: 9). This

growth indeed made a huge contribution to Korea's economy and technological competitiveness.

## (2) The outstanding features of the ICTs' development

Since the government's policies are favorable for ICTs' development, South Korea's creativity in different kinds of high-tech products is leading the world. Interestingly, their social network sites *Pandora TV*, *Nave* and *Cyworld* even emerged earlier than the American counterparts (*Youtube*, *Google* and *Facebook* respectively) (Shim, 2008: 17).

Meanwhile, like in Japan, the South Korean ICT development also stands out with an all-pervasive usage of mobile phone (“*haendupon*” in Korean). By 2004, there were 70% mobile penetration rates in South Korea, compared with 20.9% in China and 62.6% in Japan (Stanford Technology Ventures Program, 2005). On average, people upgrade their phones every ten months (D.H. Lee, 2005, cited from Hjorth, 2009: 129). Further, compared with Japan, there are more mobile e-commerce activities in South Korea (InfoCom Research 2002, cited from Ducke, 2007: 29). In general, mobile phone's popularity in South Korea is no less than in Japan. Both internally and externally, the competitiveness in mobile phone industry plays a vital role in the South Korean re-imagination (Hjorth, 2009: 14). So, in a way, the prevalence of mobile products is tightly connected with Korea's explicit and implicit forms of nationalism. The ways in which the citizens concern and consume their domestic technologies create another important feature of the Korean ICT development.

As a matter of fact, in Korea, the role of ICTs and mobile phone has been somehow created like a “repository for techno-nationalist 'cyber-Confucius-ism’”. To a large extent, technologies are serving for maintaining the traditional ties and hierarchies (Yoon, 2003 and 2006, cited from Hjorth, 2009: 32-33). For example, along with the growth of “new modern women (more independent female professionals)” from the early 1990s, the role of domestic technologies was increasingly integrated with Korea's new type of femininity. The promotions of the technologies started from car and television to the mobile phone. The media were good at using specific terms, such as *kukminjok chongso* (popular sentiment or national sentiment), *kukmin* (a member of the nation) and *kajok* (family) to influence the female consumers. Besides, advertisers utilized the rainbow-like colors of *saekdong* (traditional Korean clothing) in mobile phone advertisement. Therefore, the Korean high-tech products have been working more as a vehicle for rehearsing the role of “family” in Korean-ness. Through this kind of media discourse and promotion for technologies, the pre-existing culture gets reconnected with post-modernity in Korea. In this sense, the consumption of national

technologies is more supplementing than substituting the existing social relationship. As a result, Korea's Confucius capitalism gets protected and reinforced (Na, 2001; Cho, 2000, cited from Hjorth, 2007: 122; Hjorth, 2007: 126).

### (3) The government's attitude about ICTs' political impact

In general, the Korean government has paid much attention to the ICT's political influence.

Firstly, the government widely uses the ICTs for governance and political purpose. With the e-government project, most government services are now available online. The government has transformed itself into a more transparent and networked service provider. Meanwhile, the idea of m-government (mobile) is increasing. Further, when it comes to the e-election and e-voting, Korea is also a leading player in the world. Especially, in early 2002, instead of punching paper tickets, the ruling party (MDP: Millennium Democratic Party) introduced an electronic voting system for all the primaries. So, it took only 15 minutes to tabulate the votes and announce their presidential candidate: Roh Moo-hyun (卢武铉) (Lee, 2003: 13; Shin, 2005: 34). This policy, to a certain degree, shows the government's active attitude in embracing the ICTs into election process and political issues.

Meanwhile, the government gives much attention to the ICT-based political power coming from the public. It seemingly has strict control on the Internet-powered political activities. For example, the government has imposed restrictions on the election-related use of microblog and SNS. Since the 2007 presidential election, government has begun to control online election campaigns. Back then, police investigated 1,600 people who posted user-created content on Internet; and the National Election Commission deleted 600,000 entries online. Then, in February 2010, the Commission clearly declared that it would ban people from “posting and distributing notices, advertisements, photos, audio files and others for 180 days ahead of the elections”. “Others” here refers to social network services. Although many lawmakers, democratic organizations and civil groups have openly denounced the Commission's restriction, a commission member still stressed that “unless the existing law is amended, [the commission] will maintain its criteria (*JoongAngDaily*, 2010).” For another example, the government has really strict control on pro-North Korean online discourse. People, who violate the National Security Law, will often get heavy legal sanctions. In 2010, the government charged 17 South Koreans, who allegedly contradicted the official account on *the case of Cheonan sinking* (天安号沉没事件) (*Financial Times*, 2010). Besides, from the beginning of 2011, as a response to North Korea's attacks on the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong Island, the government

openly announced that it started to block South Koreans from accessing social network sites linked to North Korea (*JoongAngDaily*, 2010b). Then, just in January 2011, a South Korean man was indicted for his pro-North Korean discourse on *Twitter* (*Yonhapnews*, 2011). This suspect actually became the first South Korean who was arrested because of spreading illegal information on social network site.

In all, the Korean government seemingly has well noticed the ICTs' and the Internet's information-sharing power in political issues. So, on the one side, the government is trying to build the e-government and e-election structure. Meanwhile, it also bans people from doing certain election-related activities on social media. Especially when it comes to the pro-North Korean online discourse, the government has really strict control on both ordinary websites and social network platforms. Interplay between the Internet and politics seems more dynamic in Korea than in Japan.

## **Part Two: Citizens' enthusiasm in Internet-based politics in Japan and South Korea**

### **1. In Japan**

Generally speaking, the Internet in Japan is ubiquitous and it is helpful for many civil society groups in various circumstances. But, the Internet-driven activism has not taken root in Japan's civil society (Ducke, 2007: 40).

On the one side, Japanese people have noticed and used the democratic power from the Internet and new media.

Firstly, the Internet has been more and more integrated with Japan's civil society activities. The publications have started to help Japan's civil society organizations. Besides getting explanation from books about what Internet really is, the activists can also find information about how to more actively use networking tools as a weapon. Additionally, the civil society groups can get support from technical organizations, such as Association for Progressive Communications (APC)<sup>(22)</sup> and Japan Computer Access For Empowerment (JCAFE).<sup>(23)</sup> Apart from creating connection for similar non-governmental groups, these technical organizations also offer information on cheap domain names to these groups (Ducke, 2009: 30-31). In this way, with the help of the Internet, civil society groups grow up more rapidly. For instance, by contacting likely-minded foreign groups via Internet, a domestic environmental group has successfully turned into a coordinator for entire networks in Asia (*Asahi Shinbun*, 2002: 22, cited from Ducke, 2007: 41).

Secondly, the new media, such as SNSes, have also got an increasing political impact in Japan. The *Twitter*, as an example, launched its Japanese version in early 2008. Because the Japanese are very used to the mobile Internet and the 140-character tweet in Japanese can also squeeze detailed information (as the Chinese language), *Twitter* has become a hit in Japan. It performs better than other SNSes, such as *Facebook* and *MySpace*. From pop stars to politicians, a lot of prominent figures have become big fans of *Twitter*. Nearly 8 million tweets are posted from Japan each day, and it takes up 12% of the global number. In this way, “Japan is enjoying the richest and most varied form of *Twitter* usage as a communication tool” (CBSNEWS, 2010). Further, *Twitter* has been used for political purpose. For instance, when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) had high-level cost-cutting meetings in September 2009, it was live transmitted on the Internet. Meanwhile, Japanese citizens were allowed to contribute comments via *Twitter*. In addition, one of the most significant users of social media in Japan might be former Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama (鳩山由紀夫). On 1<sup>st</sup> January 2010, he started his “*Hatocafe* (<http://hatocafe.kantei.go.jp/>)” and *Twitter* (<http://twitter.com/hatoyamayukio>). “*Hatocafe*” was a website with online blog-cum-*Twitter* feeds. On “*Hatocafe*”, he wrote: “I started this blog as a first step to burying the gap between people and politics as well as changing this country together (*TehranTimes*, 2010).” So, through this communication platform, Japanese citizens could communicate with him online. Although he had to step down only a few months later because of his plummeting popularity, his blog and *Twitter* were outstanding examples showing social media's engagement with Japan's politics. To a certain degree, using *Twitter* turns into a kind of norm for the Japanese politicians (Koelling, 2011; *JapanTrends*, 2010).

On the other side, the Japanese express relatively low enthusiasm in Internet-powered political activities.

Firstly, although Japan has greater quantity and depth of online public information than in most countries (e.g. Ministries' key statistics, meeting agendas and transcripts), the public seems have less political activism. For instance, most of Japanese subscribe newspapers and read blogs regularly, but they are seemingly not very interested in political discussions, both offline and online. As Marco Koeder (Japan-based coauthor of book *The Six Immutable Laws of Mobile Business*) states, “the Japanese public seems to be the world champion in absorbing information, but that is not translated into taking positions (Koelling, 2011).” Besides, majority of respondents in a 2001 survey admitted that they had never heard of many concepts about online government, either

electronic voting nor government agencies' public comment function on homepage (NTT Data Corporation, 2001: 11, cited from Ducke, 2007: 41).

Secondly, *Twitter*-like SNSes have not fully stirred the public's political activism either. Although the Japanese bloggers create world's most active blogosphere, majority of them talk about trivia in daily life rather than politics. The topics on their private blogs and microblogs are more about entertainment, food and fashion critics. For instance, according to a 2009 poll conducted by Tokyo-based web tracking firm, neither male nor female respondents ranked politics among the top five topics for personal blogs (Koelling, 2011). Moreover, the Japanese may more like sharing information and personal opinions under an assumed name. As earlier mentioned, *Twitter* performs better than *Facebook* in Japan. In a way, one explanation of this result may be that, *Twitter* does not require its users to register with their real names, but *Facebook* does. In this sense, even if there are some Japanese critics discussing politics in blogs, they may not show real identity online. To a certain degree, this differs from China's bloggers and freelancers, majority of whom choose to take a political stance under own name and identity on both *Twitter* and *weibo*.

In all, when it comes to Japanese citizens' enthusiasm in Internet-based politics, there have been both positive trends and questions. On the one hand, the Internet has been more deeply involved with Japanese civil society groups' expansion and movement. The adoption of new media, such as *Twitter* and blogs, has also become a kind of norm for the Japanese politicians. Whereas, with a large amount of online information and a high popularity of SNSes, the Japanese are seemingly not very inspired to participate the practice of rational-critical discourse on politics, both online and offline. Rather than promoting the democratic politics, the use of advanced communication technologies are more associated with talking about trivia in daily life.

## 2. In South Korea

In general, the Internet and new media have been playing a unique role in various Korean political issues. The Koreans have expressed strong enthusiasm in the Internet-powered political activities.

For example, extensive use of the Internet and mobile phone was one of the biggest features during the process of *Korean 2002 presidential election*. To a large extent, this election has been viewed as a tremendous political improvement in Korea's democratization process since the mid-1980s. Roh Moo-hyun, a human rights lawyer who never attended college but has been active in the democratic and labor movements, finally became the president. Although Roh's opponent, Lee Hoi-chang

(李会昌) had solid support from majority of Korean conservative newspapers and a dominating position of the media market, Roh still got a higher popularity with great help of his technology-equipped cyber fans and supporters. Roh's cyber fans, which were organized in their own club "Nosamo", have successfully used the network to set up public agenda and to attract attention. Particularly on the voting day, apart from many online posts encouraging people to vote for Roh, Nosamo members also launched a vast mobile phone calling campaign to mobilize the publics. Meanwhile, alternative online news channels, such as *OhmyNews* and *Pressian* worked as an effective counter-balance to the conservative journalism. Finally, the pro-reform activists won in Korea's public opinion market. Of course, a national election is an extremely complex process with many decisive factors. The influence of newspapers, TV, Internet and mobile only takes up a small part of entire picture. Also, Roh's high popularity did not necessarily last for too long after the election. Yet, in this election, the Internet's impact was very remarkable. Roh's victory, to a certain degree, should be indebted to the incredible power coming from his cyber fans and their mobilization through the Internet and mobile phone. The extensive involvement of high-tech communication tools seems to open a new phase for the participatory democracy in Korea (Kim, 2004: 2).

Another Internet-powered political issue in Korea is *the 2008 candlelight protest* against the import of US beef. In order to reach a Free Trade Agreement with the US and to enhance exports to its market, Lee Myung-bak's (李明博) government agreed to import American beef without precautions. Since the beef might cause serious mad cow disease (疯牛病) to the public, massive demonstrations against the government's neglect of public health took place in Seoul. Both online progressive websites and forums contributed a lot for the protest mobilization. For example, *OhmyNews International* created the Reporters Forum "Candlelight", which greatly explored the power of netizens and online journalism. Additionally, Internet forums *Agora* on the "Daum" provided a form of online public sphere for activists to discuss new demonstration ideas. Apart from the rise in online investigative journalism and legal processes (e.g., judicial review), the Internet also solidarized Korean people in different economic movements. On the one side, the people gave financial support to progressive media and sites (e.g., *Hankyoreh* 韩民族日报, *OhmyNews*, *Pressian* and *Daum Agora*). Meanwhile, they also boycotted pro-government media and corporations (*OhmyNews International*, 2008). On 10 June, the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of South Korea's pro-democracy movement, demonstrations climaxed with 100,000 participants. After that, when former president Kim Dae-jung (金大中) addressed a speech at a conference for the 8<sup>th</sup> anniversary of inter-Korean summit, he affirmed Internet's and mobile's impact on candlelight protest and on direct democracy:



“We are experiencing an extraordinary phenomenon in Korea. We are witnessing the practice of direct democracy in Korea amid public participation and their keen interest for the first time since it was exercised in Athens 2,000 years ago. This direct democracy is practiced both on- and off-line via the Internet and text messages, and candlelight vigils on the streets (*TheKoreaTimes*, 2008).”

Although the candlelight protests did not end with much practical result – beef was still imported, and the Lee Myung-bak government did not step down – the Internet-powered protests were still strong and meaningful. In the end, these protests might not be strong enough to play the decisive role in Korea's policy-making. But, they indeed present the advanced communication tools' huge power in massive mobilization.

Lastly, when it comes to new media's democratic power, *Twitter* has also been well used by the Korean public for *the 2012 presidential election*. The *Twitter* users, especially the younger generation, have already started urge friends and family to “Go and Vote!”. Besides, celebrities have tried to push voters to the polling booths. For instance, Lee Oi-Soo, one Korean cult novelist, activated his large amount of followers into action by tweeting, “If you give up your right to vote, it is as worthless as trash.” To a certain degree, *Twitter* has now become part of Korea's vernacular vocabulary, and it seemingly has surprising impact on the coming election (*HarvardBusinessReview*, 2010).

To sum up, both the *Korean 2000 presidential election* and *the 2008 candlelight protest* have indicated the power of the Internet-based political activists. Although their power was not strong enough to challenge the central authority at this stage, the intensive use of Internet and social media has showed a sensational democratic potential in the political movements. Compared with the Japanese, Koreans seemingly have a higher level of enthusiasm in using Internet and mobile in massive mobilization. In a way, this technology-equipped public has made changes in Korea's progressive journalism, election outcomes and democratic politics.

### **Part Three: Comparison between Japan, South Korea and China**

#### **1. Similarities between Japan, South Korea and China**

These three countries have several similarities when it comes to ICTs' development and the use of ICTs for political issues.

Firstly, all countries have well noticed the importance of ICTs and have put a lot of effort on developing the ICT infrastructure around 1990s. Although three countries initiated the concrete plans of ICT improvement at different time, once the decision had been made, progress was very rapid. So, with the government's supportive strategies, all countries have met a quick improvement in ICTs since the early 1990s. The creation of the IT Strategic Headquarters and the “e-Japan Strategy” in Japan, and the concept of “informatization” and “high-tech knowledge-intensive economy” in Korea, both presented the government's great initiative in enhancing the ICT innovation. Further, besides the implementation of e-government and e-commerce in Japan and Korea, there are similar policies in China. For example, the Golden Bridge Project and Golden Card Project in the mid-1990s, as well as the Government Online Project in 1999, were all important examples showing the Chinese government's e-government effort (Holliday & Yep, 2005: 241).

Secondly, all three countries have received a high popularity of mobile phone and mobile communication, which has been greatly associated with the country's modernization process. Specifically, in Japan, the high penetration rates of mobile Internet have become an extraordinary feature in the ICT development. Both the outstanding emergence of “*oya yubi sedai*” (thumb generation) and the “mobile IT revolution” contributed to Tokyo's global image as the center for mobile phone innovation. In Korea, the all-pervasive use of mobile phone is no less than in Japan. By 2004, the Korean mobile penetration rates had been higher than the ones in Japan and China. This competitiveness in mobile phone and mobile industry was a very crucial factor for the re-imagination of Korea. In China, with over 429.7 billion short messages sent in 2006 (Qiu, 2008: forthcoming, cited from Hjorth, 2009: 5), the society has also entered “the age of the thumb” (Bell, 2005: 68, cited from Hjorth, 2009: 5). To a large degree, this rapid growth of mobile phone and mobile communication has also turned into a significant element for China's modernization.

Thirdly, compared with Western countries, the ICT development in three countries is more embedded with nationalist discourse. It means that the consumption and innovation of domestic ICTs are very often connected with implicit or explicit forms of patriotism and nationalism. Accordingly, the ICT development is presented in the form of a government-industry collaboration, such as the model of “gross national cool (GNC)” in Japan. Also, the ICT development can work as a link between the pre-existing social relationship and the post-modernity, as what the idea of “repository for techno-nationalist 'cyber-Confucius-ism’” shows in Korea. As a result, under the combined action of the high-tech industry, the market, the government and the consumer with

nationalist motivation, the innovation of ICTs has been endowed with cultural and national characteristics. In this sense, it may be easy to understand why *Sony*, *Samsung* and *Lenovo* are not only a technological business, but also a cultural icon of Japan, South Korea and China respectively.

Fourthly, as what has been exhibited in the “Sun Zhigang incident” and the “*Yihuang self-immolation protest*” in China, the Internet and mobile phone have also been increasingly embraced into civil society activities and political issues in Japan and Korea. In Japan, with the help of the technical organizations and the Internet, Japanese civil society groups realized expansion quickly. Besides, from the case of “*Hatocafe*”, it shows that the Japanese politicians have been more active in using new media. Since using *Twitter*-like SNS has become a norm for politicians, the Internet will be very helpful to create communication between the leaders and the public. In Korea, the public seemingly has high enthusiasm in using the Internet and mobile into political movements. The technology-equipped public has showed strong power in *the 2002 presidential election* and *the 2008 candlelight protest*. Although the result of *the 2008 candlelight protest* indicates that Korea's Internet-powered public has not become powerful enough to challenge the authority, these massive political activities did have sensational impact in Korea's democratic politics.

In all, the development of ICTs has displayed several similarities in three East Asian countries. All governments have put a large amount of attention to raise competitiveness in the ICT sector. So, due to a joint effort between the high-tech industry, the market, the government and the consumers, the ICT innovation has obtained a great improvement in this region since the 1990s. Particularly, in a way, the rapid growth in mobile industry and mobile communication has become one of the most outstanding features in the ICT development. Meanwhile, the increasing use of Internet and mobile phone has exerted huge impact in democratic politics in this region. People in three countries have all begun to notice the importance and influence of social media. From the popularity of *weibo* (in China) and *Twitter* (in Japan and South Korea), the social media have somehow made the practice of East Asian democratic politics more dynamic and vivid. As social media guru Thomas Crampton (a columnist writing about China and New Media) asserts: “Asia is...the most exciting part of the world for what's going on in social media (*HanPolis*, 2010).”

## 2. The publics' different levels of enthusiasm in political activities

Despite four similarities in terms of the ICTs' development and its social influence, these three countries have also differences in this aspect.

Firstly, China has clearly harsher Internet censorship and control than the other two countries. For example, when *Twitter* has become a hit in Japan and “part of vernacular vocabulary” in Korea, *Twitter*, *Youtube* and *Facebook* are banned in mainland China. Although there are controversies about social media's diversified effects in Japan and Korea, the Japanese and Koreans can freely access foreign SNSes. In this sense, the Japanese and Korean governments are seemingly more open and tolerant with the use of SNSes into public affairs.

Secondly, another big difference comes from people's different levels of enthusiasm in Internet-based political activities. It means that, although people in three countries have all noticed the democratic potential from social media, they have expressed different degrees of interest in using social media for democracy improvement. It seems that the Chinese and Koreans are having more political activism than the Japanese do. Here are several explanations from the aspects of Korea and Japan.

One reason is that Korea's democracy is younger than Japan. During the years of dictatorship from 1961 to 1987, the political suppression in Korea had created a dynamic environment for the growth of a “civil society”. This “civil society” was associated with multiple social segments. It included radical students, religious groups, workers, a politically liberal and broad segment of the middle class (e.g., white-collar workers, academics, lawyers, independent business people, etc.) (Kim Sukhyun, 1996, cited from Lim, 2004). So, although the goal of democracy has been realized since 1987, this widespread pro-democratic power in “civil society” would not immediately fade away (Lim, 2004). Indeed, this did not happen in South Korea. Actually, since 1987, the number of Korean civil groups and NGOs has increased from a small amount to 70,000 by 2000 (Narkarmi, 2000, cited from Lim, 2004). However, in Japan, democracy came earlier than in Korea. The Japanese's experience with authoritarianism may have turned into a distant memory for most of the citizenry of the 1980s and 1990s. Accordingly, Japan's civil society may have become more passive and parochial than it used to be (Lim, 2004). Finally, different degrees of democracy have differently influenced the Japanese and Korean citizens' political enthusiasm. This outcome is in accord with both the comparison result in 1990s and Fouser's (2001: 273) interpretation: living in a younger democratic country, the Koreans “desire for free expression that had been suppressed during the years of dictatorship that ended in 1987”. So, they are more activated in both online and offline political activities.

Another reason is that Korea is economically poorer than Japan. A comparison of public social expenditure among 30 OECD countries showed that, Korea was far behind Japan from 1990 to 2001. For example, compared with the figure as 16.9% in Japan, the public social expenditure only took up 6.1% of GDP in Korea – though both were lower than the OECD average standard (20.9%) at that time (Park, 2008). In this sense, with much more inferior welfare provisions in Korea, lots of popular discontent may be easily generated. Moreover, since the Korean people is embedded in a more ideologically polarized society – “the bourgeoisie and the new middle class gradually shifted to the side of moderation and stability, while the politicized intellectuals and those white-collar workers in blocked mobility careers acted continuously as a progressive force for democratization (Koo, 1991: 498-499)”, the public may have more conflicts and become more direct to participate democratic movement.

The third explanation comes from the side of Japan. To a certain degree, the form of an “expert democracy” in Japan's society has hindered the public to become more inspired in public affairs. Only a few citizens prefer to voice their political demands openly, because majority of the people have a relatively high reliance on opinions of expert panels and government councils. Accordingly, it is the Japanese media which usually play the agenda-setting role and lead the majority opinion. Since diversity of content and opinions is not necessarily an advantage in media competition, user-generated content is looked down by traditional media in most cases. So, it is not rare that the homepage of Japanese media has no leave-comment function for their readers (Koelling, 2011). In this sense, the relationship between media and the public in Japan may differ from the ones in China and South Korea. In South Korea, in order to compete in public opinion market, diverse information is needed for both the Internet-based progressive media and conservative media. The different analyses or political discourse from the media may nurture the public's mind with more comprehensive considerations. To a certain degree, without support from alternative media, Roh Moo-hyun might not have won the presidential election. In China, different media, especially different newspapers and magazines can also have different agenda-setting. Although the media field and political demonstrations are not as free as in Korea, China has increasing media and non-government organizations participating in public affairs. Being represented by *the Southern Metropolis Weekly* (南都周刊, *Nandu zhoukan*) and *Southern Weekly* (南方周末, *Nanfang zhoumo*), more and more radical media begin to compete with mainstream media (such as CCTV). Due to alternative media's performance in the public opinion market, China's public has had a stronger distrust of official news. As a result, the Party's propaganda is not conducted as easily as it used to be.

On all accounts, the ICTs and Internet have got different degrees of control and use in mainland China, Japan and South Korea. By and large, the Chinese government has harsher Internet censorship. Then, living in an “expert democracy” society, the Japanese citizens have less enthusiasm in using the Internet for democracy promotion. Besides, due to a relatively democratic Internet environment, a high desire for free expression after the dictatorship, as well as an ideologically polarized society, the Korean people seemingly has a more explicit form of political activism. Finally, as a whole, the cases in three East Asian countries emphasize that, on the road of improving democracy, the government's policy, the media's performance and the public's activism are all influential elements. In order to realize democracy promotion, a close and dynamic interplay between these actors is very crucial.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

### Part One: The transformation of China's public sphere

From the late imperial elite-centered associations to today's online sphere, China's public sphere has had a long history of transformation. As what happened in the West, Chinese public sphere's transformation process is also deeply embedded with the changes in state policy and economic development. This part will try to generalize public sphere's transformation process in China.

At the late imperial time, due to impetus of commercial activities, the society was to a certain degree reshaped. Together with the rise in economy, general literacy and woodblock printing technology, there was an emergence of hybrid gentry-merchant elite, especially around China's southern coastal regions. Through building merchant networks, schools or neighborhood associations, to a certain degree, this well-educated elite mobilized the local population to join in public activities and formal associations. In this way, an elite-led public sphere emerged in late imperial China. However, since this public sphere was highly localized and in lack of a full independency from the government, it was simply "filling the gaps left by the state". So, this gentry-topped public sphere, as "the third realm", was actually a product in both the forms of "state presence" and "a degree of autonomous social involvement" (Rankin, 1993: 160). In terms of political freedom, this late imperial public sphere could not be compared with the one in the West.

Then, in the late Qing era, under the impact of *Qing New Policy*, this gentry-led public sphere co-operated with the central state and became more active in public affairs. They took part in modern activities, such as building courts and transports. But, since these activities were actually working as a part of "statemaking", it became possible for the gentry leaders to use public activities for personal interests -- as a kind of "political tax farming". In this sense, the gentry elite's role in the public affairs became not distinct. They could work in between the lines of "official", "public", or "private". So, most of the time, the state and local societal powers were mutual dependent. Accordingly, the late Qing public sphere, under the leadership of these gentry elite, was not totally free from the control of the governmental authority. Without completely turning itself against the imperial state, China's late Qing public sphere was still incomparable with the one described by Habermas.

Meanwhile, because of the decentralized government control in the late Qing and Republican time, China's mass public actions gradually increased. It finally brought China an unprecedented degree

of political freedom, which could be presented both in the forms of student street demonstrations and trade union protests. During this time, with a deeper social integration, various nationwide demonstrations had showed a high level of political mobilization. Besides, in the treaty ports, such as Hankou and Shanghai, the leisurely society of the well-to-do merchants and intellectuals also developed a kind of bourgeois identity and subjectivity. In their Western-style tea house or sporting clubs, a wider range of social activities were growing up. Running independent press, organizing trade unions and discussing public affairs were all possible in these urban capitalist cities. In a way, on the basis of this deeper social integration and the increasing leisure class, China's public sphere indeed had got a good opportunity to expand and to promote political freedom. However, this public sphere's development was facing barriers as well. For example, the Republican government's regulations and terror campaigns were big obstacles to the social activism. Also, the unavoidable community conflicts between different inhabitants and immigrants could ruin the relatively peaceful environment in the treaty ports. Moreover, the republican journalists' failure to connect the public created problems too. Since they simply played the role as Confucian-liberal enlightened teachers, the Republican media did not truly treat the people as public citizens. As a result, with no media working as a link between different public groups, there was not a full degree of interdependency and political unification in China's citizens at that time. Finally, without a unified public opinion and a high level of rationality, the massive demonstrations did not have virtual impact on national decision-making but turned into forcible riots. Therefore, during the late Qing and Republican period, China might get an unprecedented degree of political activism. But, the inspired non-government forces were not tightly organized. The public sphere also missed the chance to grow stronger.

Further, along with the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949, Mao established a highly centralized press control system. The CCP's "Party journalism" accordingly emerged. As a mouthpiece of the Party, the press had to unconditionally conform to the Party's propaganda strategies. Besides, in order to prevent the intellectuals from any public sphere activities, Mao initiated the 1957-1958 *anti-rightist campaign* (反右派运动). Because of this campaign, intellectuals' leadership in the practice of rational-critical discussion became hardly possible. In the end, since there was a lack of autonomous media and well-informed intellectuals, the existence of an independent public sphere was unthinkable at that time.

Afterwards, because of Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic governing ideology, both China's media and civil society obtained a relatively freer environment. The media, receiving less governmental



funding in socialist market economy, had to seek alternative financial resources by themselves. In a way, this financial autonomy offered more editorial freedom and media independence. It also shifted the media content closer to the interests of the general public. As a result, China's media began to serve two masters: the Party and the masses. Meanwhile, because it became possible for media to disclose official abuses and to criticize societal inequality, investigative journalism, such as the *Focus* (焦点访谈) on CCTV emerged. To a certain degree, the traditional media started to play the leading role in China's public sphere. However, Deng's reform had brought certain questions as well. The market force created an increasing social gap based on status and wealth. It might create more conflicts in the society. In addition, since the reforms were simply at the level of operation, the Party state still well controlled China's media sector, including both the domestic and foreign media companies. So, the media content with cultural and political sensitivities – such as democracy, human rights and religion – were all restrained. Besides, by using more pragmatic strategy to deal with political relationship, the government began to co-opt a wider range of active forces in the public. As a result, China got a system of “dual civil societies” during this period. The first type of civil society referred to the one led by autonomous groups and individuals; the second type was the one that worked as supportive mechanisms to the Party during 1980s. Finally, when the Internet came in 1994, it was actually entering a funnel-shaped authoritarian market society: the supreme leaders on the narrow and slightly flattened top; the scale of the public interests at the broad bottom.

Moreover, until 1990s, the Internet seemingly could promise a brighter future for China's political democratization. The unprecedented success of “Sun Zhigang Incident” became an extremely remarkable instance, which showed how the traditional and online media collaborated and changed the development of a public affair. In this case, although there were still state inventions, China's public sphere and civil society have proved their potential and power in socio-political matters. In the end, overwhelming public opinion forced the state to abolish the 20-year-old detention law. Then, thanks to the emergence of new media, especially *weibo*, China's nascent participatory politics has become even more dynamic and promising. To a certain degree, the slogan of “微革命 (*wei geming*, micro-revolution)” and “围观改变中国 (*weiguan gaibian zhongguo*, to get together and watch can change China)” have turned into a realistic consideration for Chinese netizens. Either in the cases of 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, 2010 Yihuang self-immolation or the 2010 Shanghai fire, *weibo* did make huge changes in stirring public debates and participations. In a sense, these natural disasters and man-made calamities all helped in enhancing cohesiveness among the common people. Under certain circumstances, massive mobilization has turned into a re-born citizen spirit

(市民精神, *shimin jingshen*) in China's big city. But, even with the help of the Internet and *weibo*, there are also confines for public sphere's development. Problems may come from the government censorship, a high level of depoliticization and entertainment in the media landscape, as well as the possible apathy coming from bystander effect. Most importantly, it is the hidden ignorance of a "more structural critique of class conflict" that disconnects China's better-off urban citizens and population from other segments. Although there are more and more well-educated public intellectuals standing up for the rights of the common citizens, there is also an absence of full trust and interdependence between people from different social classes. The public sphere actually lacks thinkers of pan-national popularity at this stage. In this sense, by assisting the public's fundamental character in social existence, *weibo*-like social media indeed help the Chinese to promote democracy. However, it is more important for the Chinese population to realize the problem coming from an increasing class stratification and conflict. Since it may be a very long time to have this problem well solved, a nationwide public sphere can not be formed immediately, even with the help of the Internet. In all, since the Internet-based public sphere has got both improvements and barriers, China's demobilization will be a very subtle but incremental process.

## **Part Two: Comparison between China's public sphere and its Western counterparts**

This part will try to compare the Chinese and the Western public sphere. In general, they have similarities in: (1) public sphere's close interplay with the political control and economic power; (2) public sphere's transformation in the mass media era. Moreover, they have

### **1. Similarities**

#### **(1) Public sphere's close interplay with politics and economy**

In Habermas' points of view, although state power and market economies both can help in fostering collaboration between the human beings, they are in fact non-discursive modes of co-ordinations. Neither of them can offer intrinsic openings to the identification of reason and will; and they suffer from tendencies towards domination and reification. In this sense, the state authorities and economic interests are both crucial topics for and rivals of the democratic public sphere (Calhoun, 1992: 6). This complex interplay between public sphere, political control and economic power has been shown in both China's and the West's media landscape.

Firstly, the growth of the public sphere needs the economic power as a practical foundation. For example, China's public sphere was first and foremost stimulated by expansion of commercial activities and merchant associations in the better-off coastal regions. In the Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup>

century too, it was the incipient capitalist economy that offered a practical foundation for the new infrastructure of social communication, which as a result brought the bourgeois public sphere. Although it was the local gentry-merchants rather than bourgeoisie that benefited from the economic progress in China at that time, the importance of economic power for further independence of public groups was undeniable. A comparable phenomenon is observable in today's China as well. After Deng's 1978 reform and opening, the socialist market economy and commercialization did give a higher degree of autonomy to the media sector. Besides, with the improvement in people's living condition and economic status, the public has also become more well-educated and enlightened than before. To a large degree, both these factors, which are promoted by the economic force, have helped China's public sphere grow in a better way.

Besides, the state policies were a vital factor for public sphere's transformation. In the West, from the political philosophy of classical laissez-faire liberalism, the state interventionism to more concerns about globalization and capital concentration, the public sphere has gone through different levels of political control. But, in general, their cases tell that, the more liberal state policies are implemented, the more likely that public sphere can influence politics, and vice versa. In China, the performance of public sphere was affected by the political superstructure in the same way. For instance, when the centralized political control was declining in the late Qing and during the decentralization reforms period in the 1980s, the media autonomy and political freedom were obviously enhanced. But, under the higher pressure of political suppression, such as Jiang Jieshi's *White Terror campaign* and Mao's *anti-rightist campaign*, it was hardly possible to create public sphere and civil society. In a word, both in China and in the West, the degree of government's tolerance of dissent plays an essential role in creating conditions for political activism. But, the biggest difference between the Western and China's interventionism is that, in case of the Western democratic regimes, no matter how the economic or political philosophy changed – from laissez-faire to interventionism and back to neo-liberalism – certain measure of tolerance for dissent always existed, unless the democratic structures would fully break down. In China, however, the swings in policy were of much larger scale – from extreme control during Mao's heydays, to relative liberalism in the late 1980s. In this way, since the government could either make or break the public sphere in China, state policies meant much more for the civil society than the cases in UK or US.

## (2) Public sphere's transformation in the mass media era

Besides the analogous impact coming from economic and political factors, the public sphere's transformation in the mass media era also demonstrates comparable tendencies. For example, the

mass media has divided the elite from the public in both China and the West. It means, under the impact of commercialization and marketization, the public has turned into “passive mass of individualized consumers”. Although various information providers are in intense competition, few of them can really reach the public in its entirety. In the West, Habermas complains that critical activity of public discourse have been gradually replaced by professionalized mass media, in which the specialists are entitled to tell the public what to do. Decision-making seemingly has become something that only the politicians can explain and analyze. The common citizens, on the other side, are systematically inculcated with the opinions generated by the supposedly “qualified” experts. What the masses are expected to do is to accept and follow elite's ideas; and to show to what degree they accept the dominant interpretations in the opinion polls. In this way, the public's pro-active strength in changing politics has been downplayed. In China, under Mao's control, propaganda produced by centralized Party media restrained people's minds. The Party strategies aimed at preventing the intellectuals from public sphere activities, as what happened in *the anti-rightist campaign*. So, during this time, disconnection between the public and intellectuals made the existence of public sphere almost impossible. Then after 1980s, without a complete autonomy, China's public sphere was still out of the ordinary citizens' control. Now, it was manipulated by both the Party and the commercial interests. So, under the impact of commercialization, the media market has been gradually remolded following the Western style. So to say, the professionalization of media has created certain selective media powers (such as *CCTV*, *Sina* and *Sohu*), which are actually dominating China's top-down communication flows. In this way, the explicit propaganda has been taken place by implicit indoctrination, which is preset and still under control of the ruling interests. So, as the Western media, China's media also started to affect people's behavior in a way which is hidden as much as possible. More “experts” and “specialists” attend TV shows (or write blogs and microblogs) and tell the publics what to do, what not to do. Moreover, even the new media, such as *weibo*, may not be liberal enough. For instance, due to the strategy of “主打明星牌 (celebrities-centered tactic: *zhuda mingxing pai*)”, the offline relationship between influential public figures and common people has almost been duplicated online. Privileged elite are still the dominant actors in guiding public discourse. Therefore, both Chinese and the Western public spheres can not escape the possibility of “being pre-structured” by certain communication mediator, most of whom stand up for the upper classes. As a result, the publics can simply digest the pieces of the news which has been chewed by information providers.

2. Difference: the role of bourgeois intellectuals vs. China's gentry-merchant elite and middle class  
One of the biggest differences between the bourgeois intellectuals and China's contemporary middle

class is the way these people concern themselves in the public sphere. On the one side, according to Habermas' description, the bourgeois intellectuals did not simply concern themselves as the object of state actions and the opponent of public authority, but they had also taken actions against their own public authority. In short, it was the bourgeois intellectuals themselves leading the political issues that might risk their own interests. On the other side, neither the gentry-merchant elite nor the contemporary middle class have played the same role in China's public sphere. For instance, in the late Qing period, the gentry-merchant elite had no distinct role in the forms of “official” (官, *guan*), “public” (公, *gong*), and “private” (私, *si*). Their leadership in the public sphere activities was very likely to shift into private and self-interested engrossment – a kind of political tax-farming (Wakeman, 1993: 132; Strand, 1990: 4, 10). As a result, when the state policies were trying to make these gentry elite into “an integral part of the state sector (Kuhn, 1991: 7)”, it became really doubtful that the gentry elite would sacrifice their personal interests to challenge the central authority. Then, when it comes to the middle class' role today, it is also not easy for them to give up their gains from the reform and to lead a high-risk political movements. In this sense, the role of the leading force in China's public sphere is quite different from the one in the Habermasian paradigm. Accordingly, it makes China's public sphere different from its Western peers.

### **Part Three: The uniqueness of China's media landscape: uncertainty and flexibility**

Because neither the gentry-merchant elite nor the contemporary middle class has taken the responsibility to lead China's public issues, it seems that the public sphere so far has been in a lack of societal self-regulation on a massive scale. So, under the interplay between this lack of self-regulation and the government's changing policies, China's media landscape is actually living in a unique environment: a society with uncertainty and flexibility.

To begin with, due to the lack of self-regulation, no matter in the late imperial gentry-led public associations, or contemporary online public realms, China's public sphere had difficulties to obtain a complete independency. Every time the public sphere got a freer space to grow up, it was seldom driven by a unified bottom-up mobilization. Instead, most of the time, the growth was triggered because of the top-down governmental policy and strategy – for example, that of relative decentralization. For instance, in the late Qing time, one reason that facilitated a rise of associational life was the practice of *New Policy* by the government itself. This policy was initiated to increase the state authority and retrieve the ruling power. Elite-run modern activities (such as building schools, courts and transports) were officially supported, because they were actually in the form of statemaking. In this sense, the elite-led public sphere activities were not totally from their

self-regulation, but from the impetus of national policies. Or, for another instance, the media and public sphere, which got an increasing autonomy after the 1980s, were actually a result of state's 1978 reform and opening up policy. Because the CCP's decentralization policy created higher level of political tolerance and societal flexibility, a societal transformation emerged in China. At times, people can generate some amount of pressure from below. But, as there was still not a full self-regulated mobilization in the course of this societal transformation, the politicization of class conflicts has hardly happened on a large scale.

In this sense, due to the lack of self-regulation from the bottom of the public, China's public sphere has no enough power to challenge the supervision of the state. It seems that the governmental policies and attitude are always decisive factors for China's public sphere activities. So, being influenced by the changing official policies, China's media landscape is actually living in a crucial environment with a climate of uncertainty.

Moreover, from the cases in earlier chapters, it can tell that the uncertainty climate has brought two different outcomes. On the one side, this climate of uncertainty is utilized as a pretty pragmatic tool for governmental control and censorship on public communication. On the other side, by creating adaptability and flexibility to society (especially for the media and the public), uncertainty attracts potential powers and may bring unpredictable outcomes to political activities.

Specifically, with regards to the first kind of outcome, the majority of mass campaigns during the 1950 and 1978 are representative examples, such as Mao's *anti-rightist campaign* against the supposedly "rightist" intellectuals. In fact, each campaign during this period was not predictable. There was no indication about when the following campaign would come and who would be the next targets. Under the fears about policy ambiguity and periodic accusations, potential targets became so panicked that everyone had to behave like Party loyalists. This uncertainty feature played a prominent role in silencing oppositional voices at that time (Stern and Hassid, 2010: 17).

Additionally, the "Sun Zhigang incident" shows this kind of outcome too. Although the case has brought a relatively satisfactory outcome, the state's attitude was very unsure and ambiguous. On the one side, the state showed intentions to well solve this case with an unprecedented abolishment of law. On the other side, the authorities never stopped intervening in the whole course. To a certain degree, the unpredictable arrests and punishment of *the Southern Metropolis News*' officials indicates the state's reaction after the case was over. In this sense, the government's attitude about

state-citizen conflicts was quite uncertain and changing. With such uncertainty climate, the government has more space to make a decision which better suits it, on case-to-case basis. It also allows itself to settle accounts with concerning participants afterwards.

Meanwhile, Sun Zhigang's case can also present the second kind of outcomes: the climate of uncertainty brings relatively positive results for the public. Before Sun's case, most reports praised government actions under the detention and dispatch policy. But, the reports highlighting brutality in detention process were not banned. In fact, the reports about peasant laborers' tragedies had become a popular media topic long before Sun's case, and there was no certain official restriction on such news content. So, at that time, to disclose Sun's case seemed not necessarily an extreme action against the state's policy. In other words, if the peasant laborers' miserable lives were reportable in mass media, the unexpected death of Sun Zhigang in detention center would not go beyond the state's tolerance either. In this sense, the uncertainty of news topics indeed gave traditional media flexible choices. While the *Nanfang Daily* (more like the Party newspapers) covered Sun's incident from a governmental remedial perspective, uncertainty climate also encouraged the *Southern Metropolis News* to do investigative journalism. Besides, this kind of uncertainty in traditional media also spilled over to the online sphere, which as a result involved much more citizens in critical discussions. It means that, since the investigative reporting was not forbidden in press media, online portal sites could accordingly consider this topic acceptable as well. Especially after CCP's mouthpiece newspapers *People's Daily* had joined the reporting, online media and netizens' hesitation would consequently went down. At the end, the uncertainties and expectations stirred China's public to actively take part in public issues and contribute to democracy promotion. Therefore, in Sun's case, the lack of clarified censorship rules on news topics somehow created incredible possibilities for online public sphere. It was the climate of uncertainty created a kind of invisible potential for wider political participations.

In all, in China's political mobilizations, there has been a lack of massive self-regulation from the bottom of the public sphere. So, when the public affairs happened, the attitude of the government would become a very influential element. In this sense, China's public sphere is actually facing a really high level of uncertainty. Under most circumstances, this uncertainty climate allows unpredictable censorships and risks for the non-state actors. But, in certain circumstances, it also gives promising flexibilities and opportunities for activists. Since this climate of uncertainty is deeply embedded in China's socio-political environment, it certainly has huge impact on the role of China's public sphere.

#### **Part Four: Decentralization, centralization and recentralization**

Under CCP's authoritarian governance, the climate of uncertainty has apparently brought more flexibility to the state than to the public. So, in a way, this uncertainty climate is actually working as a national strategy, which is very helpful for the Party to deal with new political relationships after 1980s. Then, from the perspective of state's decentralization policy, this uncertainty is actually serving to fill gaps between decentralization and centralization.

It means that, when conflict takes place between the decentralized autonomy and the centralized authority, the uncertainty in regulations and instruments can be used as back-up means for the state. So, state-citizen conflicts can be always solved in a way desirable for the Communist government. For example, when viewing the decentralization policy's impact in China's higher education sector, many studies tell that, decentralization can be a mechanism for *tightening* central control of the periphery instead of allowing greater decision making for the lower levels of governments (Neave and Vught, 1994; Hanson, 1999; Hawkins, 1999; Mok, 2001). In this sense, the decentralization policy in China's media landscape may work in the same way. So to say, in order to maintain CCP's accountability, the government needs visible improvement in democratic politics. But, in the end, what the government really goes after is the centralized leadership. Therefore, in order to merge these two paradoxical targets, the government needs certain flexible tools, which assert their power by recentralization. So, in media and public sphere, such flexible tools are their subtle controls exploiting different types of uncertainties. Only in this way, decentralization of political control on free expression can be somehow compensated. Accordingly, the compensation will be viewed as a process of recentralization. In a word, it is the uncertainty feature working as a lever in between of the hidden (but absolute) CCP supremacy and visible (but relative) political freedom. In this sense, in China's social politics, there are actually centralization, decentralization as well as recentralization taking place together.

Finally, beneath this twisted setting with a few breaths of democratic air, China's public sphere has to struggle harder. To what extent people can understand this uncertainty regime and utilize it in the ways favorable for the civil society is a very crucial question. Besides, if people from different social segments can build interdependency and "strong tie" between each other is also decisive. The democracy promotion first of all needs China's public to exploit their fullest energy and potential as a whole. Then, with the help of the Internet, China's democratization will be going in a subtle but incremental way. Though the process may be presented as "an evolution," rather than "a radical revolution", the idea of "political democracy" has become more and more wishful.



## Notes:

- (1) See 《三国志·魏书·王朗传》：“设其傲狠，殊无入志，惧彼舆论之未畅者，并怀伊邑。” (*Sanguozhi, Weishu, Wanglangzhuan*: “*she qi ao hen, shu wu ru zhi, ju bi yu lun zhi wei chang zhe, bing huai yi yi*”).”
- (2) The complete meaning of “明夷待访录 (*mingyidaifanglu*)” is: 在黎明前的昏暗时期所写, 等待以后的明主贤君来访求的著作 (*zai limingqian de hun'an shiqi suoxie, dengdai yihou de mingzhu xianjun lai fangqiu de zhuzuo*). This is a book which is written in the dawn. It is also a plan which is expected to be read by liberal prince. My translation from the Chinese) (黄宗羲著, 李广柏注译, 1995: 导读 P14) (Huang Zongxi zhu, Li Guangbo zhuyi, wrote by Huang Zongxi; translated by Li Guangbo, 1995: 14).
- (3) According to Simon (2009: 950, 951), more information can be found at Zhang Ye, Chinese NGOs: A Survey Report, in emerging civil society in the Asia Pacific community 93, 95 (1995). And, Zhang Ye, China's Emerging Civil Society, Brookings Institution. At: [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2003/08china\\_ye/ye2003.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2003/08china_ye/ye2003.pdf) (accessed 9 April 2011).
- (4) The “interactivity” emphasizes in the technical sense, since the Internet creates a technological platform for users to interact with each other. The “interaction” emphasizes in the social sense, it refers to actual instances of users building relationships or forming ties in the digital world (Tai, 2006: 163).
- (5) View Xu Youyu's interview in Chinese at: <http://cul.sohu.com/20100304/n270564208.shtml> (accessed on 26 Jan 2011).
- (6) View article about Hu Yong and Yang Guobin at: <http://www.chinaelections.org/NewsInfo.asp?NewsID=152621> (accessed on 26 Jan 2011).
- (7) Cited from Tai (2006: 264). Online memorial site at: <http://www.netor.com/m/box200304/m26789.asp?BoardID=26789> (accessed 6 June 2004).
- (8) According to Liebman and Wu (2007:15), a well-known Peking University professor engaged in a pointed two-hour online discussion on the case. The transcript is available at: He Weifang (贺

卫方), *Cong Sun Zhigang Shijian Kan Zhongguo Fazhi Fazhan (Development of Rule of Law in China as Reflected by the Sun Zhigang Affair)*. On *RenMinWang* (People's daily online), June 10, 2003. At: <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shehui/46/20030610/1013342.html> (accessed 9 April 2011).

(9) Such as Nie's case in Liebman and Wu (2007).

(10) When Jack Dorsey (Twitter co-founder), Ai Weiwei (Chinese artist, architectural designer, activist and blogger), Richard MacManus (ReadWriteWeb's editor and founder) and Emily Parker (the Arthur Ross Fellow at the Asia Society's Center on U.S.-China Relations) had an open discussion about social media and digital activism in March 2010, there was a conversation between a lady guest and Ai Weiwei in relation to Ai's radical activities and these activities' true meaning for common Chinese population. According to the article “当微博遇上Twitter (*Dang weibo yushang Twitter*, When *weibo* meets Twitter)” on the *Southern Metropolis Weekly* (2010: 34, in Chinese), during their argument, Jack Dorsey seemed a little bit of confused about the point. Seemingly, Jack Dorsey did not see that much relationship between this argument and the role of his Twitter. From Ai and Jack Dorsey's conversation, it tells that the Chinese twitterers and the “outsiders” do have unlike concerns about Twitter's role and impact. Ai not only told Jack Dorsey that Chinese people think Jack is “some kind of God”, but also questioned the need of real professional journalists if Twitter could appear in China in the future. But, on the side of Jack Dorsey, he even admitted that he wasn't aware of Twitter's absence in China until a few weeks ago.

(11) This list of Top 10 most followed could be viewed at: <http://t.sina.com.cn/pub/top/starfans>.

(12) About the sense of loneliness for Chinese netizens, an article “The illusion caused by online identity. We still have nothing online” (my translation from the Chinese “虚拟身份带来的存在幻觉，在网上我们依然一无所有”) can be found at *New Weekly* (2010), Volume 329, 15 August 2010, pp58—61.

(13) “全民媒体时代 (pan-national media age)” is used by Wang Keqin (王克勤), chief correspondent of China Economic Times (中国经济时报, <http://www.cet.com.cn/>). From online article (in Chinese) at: <http://news.time-weekly.com/story/2010-11-25/421.html> (accessed 18 January 2011).



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